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FULL METAL PANIC!™

Into the Blue



Shouji Gatou
Art by Shikidouji

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FULL METAL PANIC!™

Into the Blue

Volume 3
Story by Shouji Gatou
Art by Shikidouji

POP
FICTION

TOKYOPOP Inc.
5900 Wilshire Boulevard, Suite 2000
Los Angeles, CA 90036
www.TOKYOPOP.com

Story	Shouji Gatou	Pre-Production Supervisor	Lucas Rivera
Illustrations	Shikidouji	Digital Imaging Manager	Chris Buford
Translation	Duane Johnson	Art Director	Al-Insan Lashley
Cover and Interior Design	James Lee	Creative Director	Anne Marie Horne
Layout	Michael Paolilli	Production Manager	Liz Brizzi
Editor	Michelle Prather	Managing Editor	Vy Nguyen
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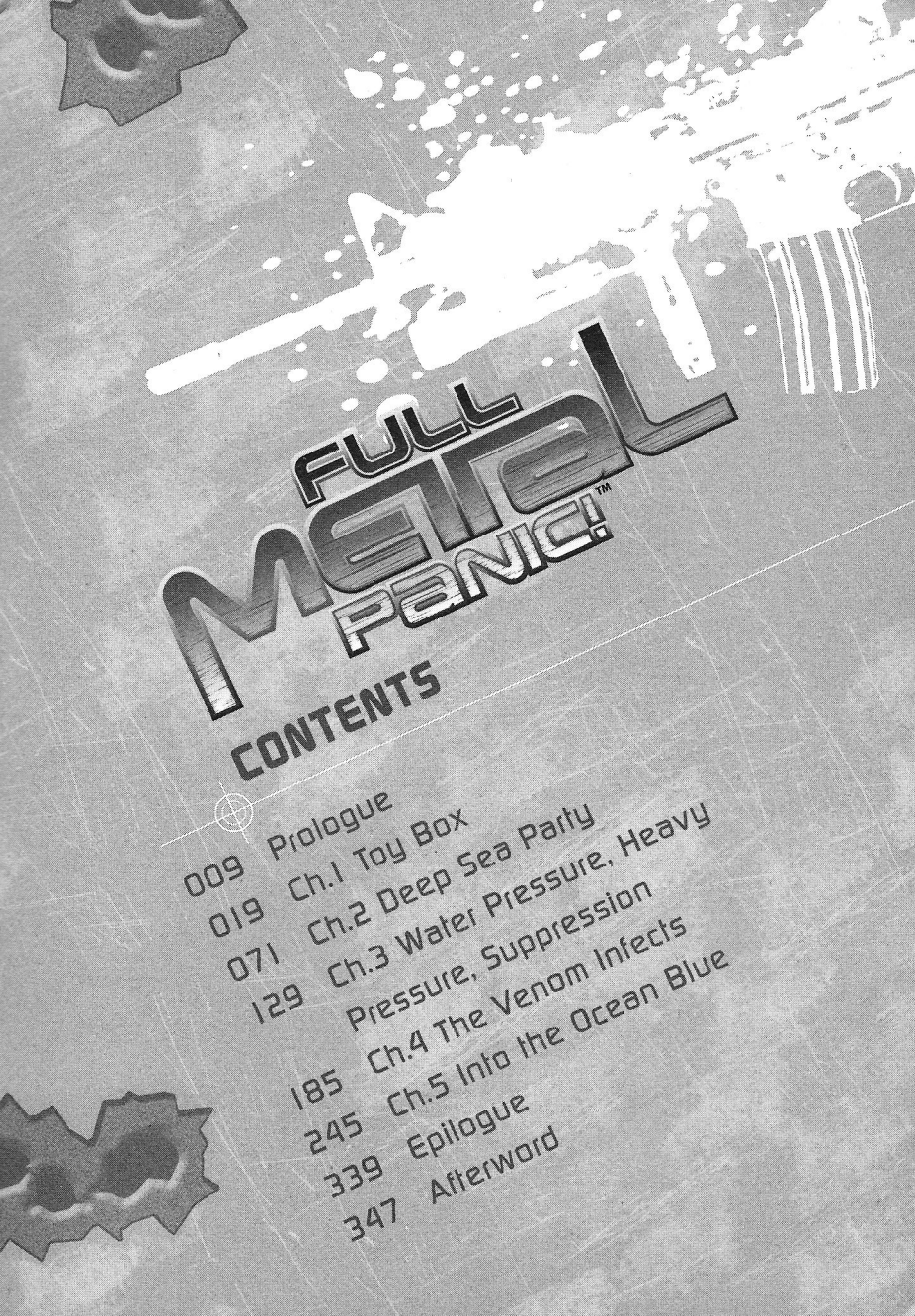
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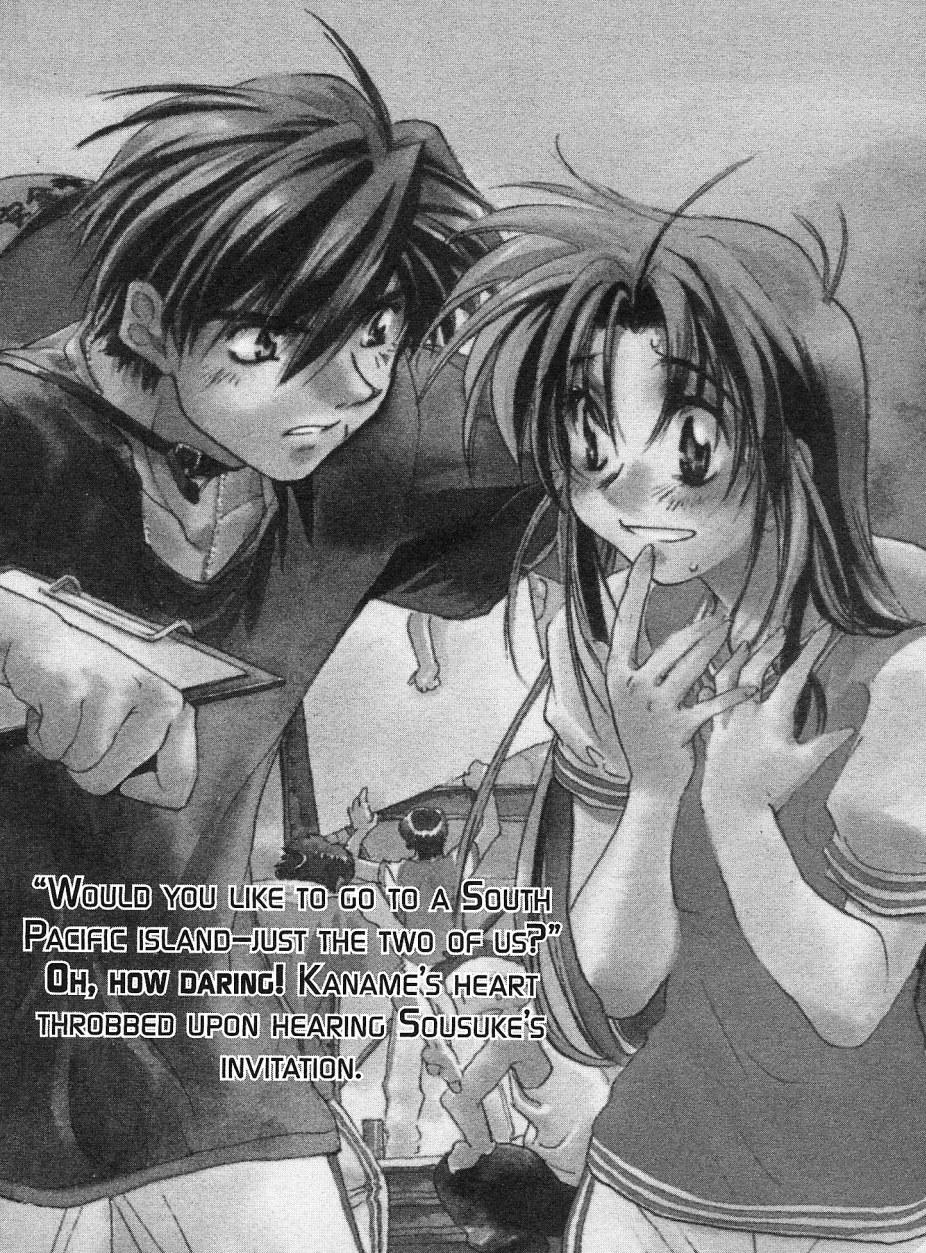
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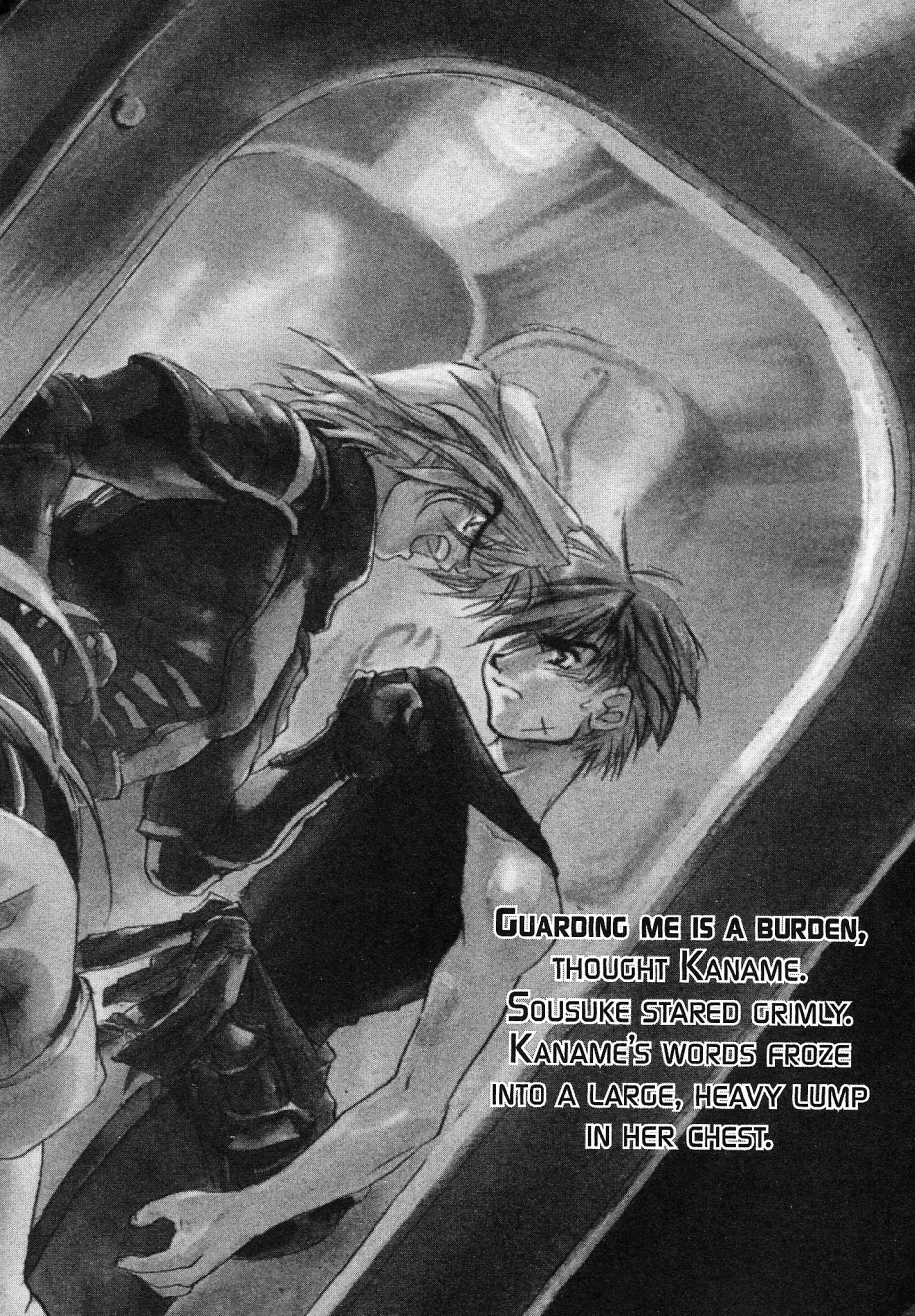
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"WOULD YOU LIKE TO GO TO A SOUTH
PACIFIC ISLAND—JUST THE TWO OF US?"
OH, HOW DARING! KANAME'S HEART
THROBBED UPON HEARING SOUSUKE'S
INVITATION.





GUARDING ME IS A BURDEN,
THOUGHT KANAME.
SOUSUKE STARED GRIMLY.
KANAME'S WORDS FROZE
INTO A LARGE, HEAVY LUMP
IN HER CHEST.

**VENOM, THE DEADLY SCARLET TERROR. THE LAMBDA
DRIVER DOESN'T WORK AGAINST THIS NIGHTMARISH STEEL
BUTCHER? A GRAVE SENSE OF UNEASE WELLED INSIDE
SOUSUKE.**





Prologue

The summer vacation of Kaname Chidori's second year of high school would end in one week. When the thought of it occurred to her, a sigh unconsciously escaped her lips. Kaname's slender face was good looking, but at the moment, it revealed that she was slightly depressed. This was the point at which all typical summertime activities had been enjoyed, and the contents of her wallet proved discouraging. The days were sluggish at best.

Her friends were not much help. They were either busy working part time for a toy company, piled down with prep school summer courses, or on trips with their boyfriends. Kaname was sweating it out at school in the torrid heat doing prep work for the cultural festival that was still more than a month away.

She was in her gym uniform, sprawled out like a vagrant on a vinyl sheet in the deserted hallway—where there was shade, it was



well ventilated, and the floor was cold. Its air conditioning currently broken, the student council office felt like a steam bath.

Kaname lay face down, scanning a budgetary allocation document. *So useless*, she thought. *"Imitation Japanese vellum, packing tape, lumber." Meaningless figures for such trivial goods. What the heck am I doing here, anyway? While I'm here doing this, Kyouko's doing social studies at her work. Mizuki's studying at Yozemi. Shiori and her boyfriend are at a boarding house in Izu Kogen, where they're . . . argh, that little slut. I want some memories of my own—intense, blazing hot ones. Summer memories so monumental that I'll remember them my whole life! Regardless, the summer's going to end. This thing really is useless, isn't it?*

Flipping through the document page by page until her hand stopped suddenly, Kaname proclaimed, "What's up with *this*?" She furrowed her brow as she reviewed the portion of the invoice that detailed the production cost for the admission reception gate that was being constructed for Jindai High's cultural festival. The gate, designed to be the main entrance to the festival each year, always had required a substantial amount of planning because it was the festival's most famous sight. Last year, the art club had used a peace motif that included a three-dimensional display of countless doves taking flight into the blue sky.

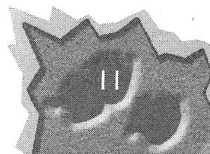


The production cost of this year's gate was abnormal. It typically would cost ¥70,000 to ¥80,000 at most, but according to the invoice, this year, it cost ¥1,476,000. It was written in familiar, easily recognizable handwriting—*his* handwriting.

"How could an admission reception gate cost *that* much?" Kaname exclaimed as pure anger coursed throughout her entire body. She sprang to her feet and sprinted down the hall toward the courtyard, located behind the training halls. This spot served as the materials storehouse for the festival, and here, several male students were drenched in sweat, toiling away at constructing the gate. Because its completion required so much time, executive committee members starting working over summer vacation.

"Wha—what the . . ." When Kaname first saw the gate well under construction, her eyes opened wide in shock. It was more of a fort than a gate. With a metal frame about as tall as a two-story building, it could have been a watchtower. Fortified with lead-colored iron plates, rivets, and long, narrow gun ports, it was unbelievably sturdy, and it towered dauntingly over all below.

The smell of burnt iron hung in the air. Metal sheets, steel framing, some kind of electronic devices, and a generator sat all in a row, as electric drills and gas burners created a tremendous racket.





"Hey, whoever's in charge, get over here!" Kaname shouted.

The site foreman peeked out from the other side of the steel gate. It was Sousuke Sagara—with messy black hair, a sullen face, and pursed lips. Donning blackened working gloves with a safety helmet complete with a visor, Sousuke said, "Oh, Chidori, what's wrong?"

"Sousuke, what *is* all this?" wailed Kaname.

"As you can see, it's the gate for the cultural festival."

"That's not what *I* see at all. Explain this!"

Sousuke calmly folded his arms and gazed up at the unfinished admission reception gate. "The motif for last year's gate was 'peace,' so this year, it's 'security.' This gate is both an observation and defense point for maintaining public order. Similar structures can be found in cities in Northern Ireland and Palestine."

"This isn't Northern Ireland or Palestine," insisted Kaname. "It's Tokyo!"

"It's still unfinished, but we plan to add more emplacements, searchlights, and loudspeakers," said Sousuke in an unaffected tone. "It's designed to hold out for quite some time should heavily armed terrorists attack an event populated with throngs of people."

Sousuke, who had grown up amid various overseas battlefields, couldn't comprehend living in a peacetime environment like Japan.



The chances that heavily armed terrorists would attack their school's cultural festival were nil, but he couldn't grasp that reality.

"You know what? The police are more likely to show up than terrorists," asserted Kaname.

"That's fine. Not even police equipment would be able to destroy this gate," retorted Sousuke.

"No, that's not what I was getting at—"

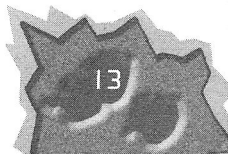
"Not even terrorists could interfere. Its primary function is its effectiveness as a deterrent. I think the people who visit the festival will feel a sense of security when they see this gate."

"Sense of security?" The enormous admission reception gate had such a sinister aura that there was no way anyone would feel secure. "That's why you're requesting one and a half million yen for this junk?" asked Kaname.

"That's right. It looks like I can get my hands on some Israeli-made composite armor at an exceptional discount. It usually goes for more than five million yen, but I have this old friend who's a French arms dealer, and—"

Whap! Kaname slapped Sousuke's head with the bundle of documents in her hand.

"What was that for?"





"Shut up! Are you aware of how much the budget is for the cultural festival? One and a half million yen! What'll happen if we do things your way? A school with nothing set up except a gloomy fortress towering like some monolith at the front gate—won't that, like, make for a terribly surreal cultural festival?"

"Hmm . . ."

"Armor plating is rejected; use plywood.' Ugh!" As Kaname groaned, she paced in a circle around the steel gate. Its frame was insanely sturdy. She could tell how hard it had been to construct it, but she didn't get the point. *Why does Sousuke always, always, always waste his energy this way?*

Sighing for the hundreth time that day, Kaname absentmindedly walked below the center of the gate. As she passed through, Sousuke called out, "Uh oh, Chidori, that's where—"

Kaname's right foot stepped on a switch, which caused a nozzle installed overhead to shake. "Heh?"

A red paintlike substance sprayed violently from the nozzle in all directions. The scarlet mist reduced her visibility to zero.

"Too late," muttered Sousuke, attempting to wave the mist aside.

As the red cloud cleared, Kaname stood there looking pitiful, her whole body red, not unlike a *mentaiko*. "Keho! Wh-what just . . .?"



"A marking device malfunction," answered Sousuke calmly.

"What do you mean?"

"It's a device that reacts to outsiders trying to bring weapons into the cultural festival. It sprays them with paint so that even if they escape, the suspects are recognizable at a glance. Looks like there's still room for improvement, though."

"You're such a . . . such a . . ." Kaname's whole body shook, and her now red hair bristled.

"Chidori, calm down."

"How dare you speak to me that way!" She was going to charge and kick away at him—or so he thought. But in an instant, a different emotion swept over Kaname's chest like a tidal wave. It was deep sadness—deeper than the sea. Well, it wasn't *that* deep, but it was sorrow that went deeper than the school pool, at least. Maybe her current miserable state was accelerating the futility she had been feeling before.

"Chidori?" Sousuke peered dubiously at Kaname as her shoulders slumped and tears spilled from her eyes.

"This is too much," she whimpered.

"There's nothing to be scared of. The paint is nontoxic to humans."

"That's not what I mean!"



Whack! Kaname finally knocked Sousuke down. Toplike, he spun at high speed, crashed into the fortress gate, and collapsed to the ground.

"I'm *sad*, that's what I am. . . ." Kaname heaved a sigh without looking at Sousuke, who was crumpled, powerless. "*This* is how summer's going to end. This is all my youth and my eleventh grade summer amount to. Not only am I floundering around with a zero-delicacy war nut boy, I'm all red like some Char-personalized mobile suit, and I'm on the verge of tears under a hunk of scrap iron!"

"Hmm."

"You probably don't understand, do you? Summer vacation is a special time for girls."

As Sousuke stood up, he turned to Kaname and asked, "Is that so?"

"Yes, it is! At least in manga and TV dramas . . . but whatever, I don't care anymore. I'll stop hoping for some special experience. I'll just sit quietly at home until school starts a week from tomorrow. At least then I won't have to see your stupid face."

Sousuke's demeanor grew meek as he absorbed the worst of Kaname's outrage. "In other words, you have nothing to do for a week?"

"No, nothing. Sorry to disappoint."



Sousuke put his chin in his hand and contemplated his next move. As he surveyed the students still working, he whispered as though he didn't want them to hear. "Would you like to go on a trip with me for a few days?"

"Heh?"

"To a South Pacific island abundant with nature. Just the two of us—no one else."

Kaname doubted her own ears. Sousuke had never invited her anywhere before. And just the two of them to a South Pacific island? "A-are you serious?"

"Yeah. And you needn't worry about expenses. I've been waiting for a chance to invite you for a long time."

A few days. In other words, overnight. A young man and woman on a trip alone, overnight. Kaname was terribly shaken by the sudden, unexpected invitation. "Ho . . . that's, uh . . . well . . . uh . . ."

"You don't want to?"

"It . . . it isn't like that, really."

"I think you'll enjoy it."

Kaname became incoherent and mumbled, her mind combatting an influx of questions. *What do I do? I'm not sure. How could Sousuke be this bold? My heart isn't prepared for this. But if I decline, there may not be another chance.*



I guess I'd better find out a little more about what he has in mind. First of all, he and I aren't really that way. Her face was flushed but vacant-looking, and her mind continued to spin in circles.

"What are you going to do?" Sousuke asked Kaname. "Should we forget about it after all?"

Giving him a sideways glance, Kaname responded hesitantly, "You won't do anything weird?"

"I won't do anything weird."

"It won't be dangerous?"

"It won't be dangerous."

"I'll have a proper place to sleep?"

"You will."

"Hmm . . ." *That's right*, thought Kaname. *When you think about it, of course we can sleep in separate rooms. I'd only be loafing around my place if I don't go, anyway. It might be nice do something exciting at the end of vacation. I still haven't done my summer homework, but oh well. Yeah, just a little adventure . . .*

She shrugged her shoulders and answered, "Oh, okay. If you really want me to, I'll go with you."

"Then it's decided: I'll pick you up in the morning the day after tomorrow," Sousuke said, and he went back to his work.

Unfortunately, the "little trip" didn't end with merely a *little* adventure.



CHAPTER I

Toy Box

August 25, 23:45 (Greenwich Mean Time)
Mariana Islands Coastal Waters
U.S. Navy Submarine Pasadena

“Command center, this is sonar. New contact, bearing two-zero-six. Designation: Sierra Fifteen,” reported the sonarman on duty, just as the captain, Commander Killy B. Sailor, was about to announce that he was going on his first break in six hours.

The captain typically would leave command of the ship to the officer on duty, shut himself in the captain’s cabin, and straddle the toilet with great determination, after which he would ponder leisurely puffing a Cuban cigar. But because his subordinate had picked up a new contact on the radar, there was no way the captain would leave his post until the contact’s identity had been confirmed.



Sailor cursed so loudly that everyone in the command center could hear. "Shit!" As he turned his chiseled face downward in a frown, he angrily shrugged his muscular shoulders. It was often whispered (somewhat quietly, due to fear) among his subordinates that with his intense emotional ups and downs, he was like Schwarzenegger in a comedy.

It was the tenth day since sailing from Hawaii's Pearl Harbor. The USS Pasadena, the fast-attack nuclear submarine (SSN) that Sailor commanded, had been cruising at a depth of two thousand one hundred and fifty-three feet, and a speed of twenty knots—about fourteen miles per hour.

"Captain, in a place like this, you should abstain from such language," remonstrated the young, thin, very handsome executive officer of Japanese descent, Lieutenant Marcy Takenaka.

"Huh? Takenaka, are you a moron? I said 'Shit!' because I need to take one. You take issue with what your captain says, eh, XO?"

"That is part of my job. The navy recognizes my right to do so," replied the XO, completely composed.

Captain Sailor glared as though he were about to snap at the lieutenant. "There you go again. All you Japanese are like that: an



embarrassed laugh, and out comes your list of stupid reasons. That's why I can't stand you."

"Ah! There are at least two mistakes in what you just said. One, I am a full-fledged American. Two, I do *not* laugh in embarrassment."

"Shut up, you nuclear-powered knucklehead!" The captain suddenly grabbed the XO in rage.

"Hggg!"

"It's been nearly two years since you and I were put together, and now I finally get it. Takenaka, you're an enemy spy. You're the worst enemy that ever plundered the budget of our beloved Navy—an Air Force *stooge*! All your arguing is proof of that!"

"How could that possibly be? Please release me, captain!"

The command center crew simultaneously shook their heads as if to say, "Here we go again." Every time something came up—from the ship's menu to the nuclear reactor's output—the captain and the XO butted heads.

"Excuse me, command center, this is sonar. Regarding Sierra Fifteen . . ."

Reminded by his subordinate of the new contact that had been detected a bit ago, Captain Sailor regained his senses. "Oh, yeah. Right, right." Captain Sailor shoved away XO Takenaka's body and



crossed the command center, peering into the sonar room ahead. "So, where is it? Is it far?"

"Aye, sir. Besides being intermittent, the signal is weak, so I still can't be sure." The sonarman studied the display with a troubled face. Scowling at the green waterfall-like image, he turned and furiously flipped various dials and switches.

Submarines had nothing that could be called windows. As the crew moved along, their only method of investigating the outside was through sound. If there were a ship that gave off absolutely no noise, no one aboard the submarine would be aware of its existence, even if the ship were bobbing right in front of the submarine.

"It seems awfully large for two screws. It might be a Russian boomer, but there's no corresponding data. The DEMON also is quite different," Sailor assessed.

"Boomer"—or SSBN—indicated a ballistic missile submarine. It was a large ship, packed with a heap of nuclear warheads, designed as a vanguard for all-out nuclear war.

"Could it be a new model of Typhoon class?" queried Sailor.

At some point, XO Takenaka had recovered from his bout of labored breathing and stuck his upper half into the sonar room to



interject. "No sir, that's not possible. No shipyard but Severodvinsk can construct the giant Typhoon class. If such a new ship were put to sea, the guys in the Atlantic Fleet attached to the Barents Sea should have found it first. SOSUS would have caught it, too. But not a word of warning from COMSUBPAC—"

"I'm aware of all that, vertical-launching lamebrain!" Sailor interrupted him with one term after another that a layman wouldn't understand.

"Why do you . . . ? Ahem. Anyway, perhaps it would be best to consider this a brand new model," suggested Takenaka.

"Hmm . . ." Sailor rested his chin in his hand.

A giant submarine of unknown nationality apparently was cruising through the Pasadena's heading. It didn't seem to be Russian, and they didn't know whether it was friend or foe. To a submariner, all such contacts were enemies.

"Let's try following it a bit," commanded Sailor. "I'll get permission from headquarters. We're rising to periscope depth."

"Aye, sir. Shall I prepare the telegram?" asked Takenaka.

"Sure, suit yourself."

"Just a minute, captain. I've determined its distance," muttered the sailor, who was using short-range high-frequency (HF) sonar. His



face paled with fear. "It's close—and huge. Less than six hundred yards away and closing."

A mere six hundred yards: roughly five times the length of this ship, he thought. At that short distance, it would be no surprise to collide at any time. When the hell did it get so close?

"Depth?" shouted Sailor.

"Five hundred feet! At this rate, we'll collide."

Before the report was finished, Captain Sailor announced loudly, "Starboard! Three-three-zero. Depth: eight hundred! Maximum dive. Hurry!"

"Aye, sir! Heading three-three-zero, depth: eight hundred, maximum dive!"

The XO hurried back into the command center and gave detailed orders to the helmsmen, who sat upright, operating their control sticks in a nimble yet undeniably weary fashion. All of a sudden, the ship swerved in a desperate attempt to avoid colliding with the ship of unknown nationality. The turbulence from the sudden rotation caused a loud buckling sound, and the hull seemed to creak and groan.

"Damn it, even the surfers in Honolulu are gonna hear us. Sonar, do they show any signs of attacking?" called Sailor.



"None, sir! At any rate, they're too close!"

The sudden risky maneuver resulted in a state of feverish mayhem inside the Pasadena.

"Th-they're submerging, too, and they're too close. Range: four hundred—no, three hundred . . . two hundred fifty . . . two hundred . . ." the sonarman shouted, clinging to his headset. The approaching Sierra Fifteen, the mysterious large submarine, plowed straight ahead on a collision course. *Shit, shit, shit! Why aren't they evading? They should've noticed us!*

"Captain, we can't avoid them completely!"

A cold shiver ran down Sailor's spine. A collision in the depths of the ocean, that was every submariner's nightmare. It was different than a car accident. A mere crack in the hull couldn't stand up under such tremendous water pressure. If the hull were to breach and seawater suddenly poured into the ship, it probably would be too late. The entire one hundred thirty-three person crew, metal and oil, and nuclear fuel all would become a casualty of the sea.

"Range: one hundred . . . fifty—we're going to hit!" warned the sonarman.

"All hands, brace yourselves!" Sailor shouted, the shipwide broadcast microphone in hand.

Every crewman on the sub firmly grabbed onto something near him, including handrails, console panels, and backs of chairs.



In desperation, some grasped ballpoint pens and frying pans. There were even sailors who clutched their own testicles through their pants without realizing it.

The ugly screeching sound of crushed metal signaled a destructive crash—which didn't happen. The Pasadena continued to submerge, generating a horrendous noise, but that was all. It had long since passed the position at which it should have collided with the oncoming submarine.

As the XO came to, he ordered the helmsmen to lock in their heading and depth. Suddenly, the interior of the ship grew quiet. The crew timidly glanced at one another with unpleasant faces. What should have attacked them did not, in spite of all the time that had passed. All one hundred thirty-three crewmen seemed to share the uncomfortable sensation one feels when a long bout of hiccups finally ceases.

"Sonar, this is the command center. Where's Sierra Fifteen?" Captain Sailor asked in a whisper.

"This is sonar. Well, it just . . . disappeared."

"It did *what*?"

"It vanished. Even on the shortwave range, it's nowhere to be seen," replied the sonarman nervously.



How could a giant contact the size of a Soviet Typhoon class disappear in an instant? he wondered.

Suspicious, Sailor ordered an engine stop. In order to make absolutely no sound and carefully investigate the area, they allowed inertia to slowly rotate the ship.

To no avail, the sonarman reported, "Nothing, sir. It really is gone."

"How could that be? Inspect the BQQ Five fully," ordered Sailor, guessing it was a machinery malfunction.

"Captain, it isn't that I'm against doing so, but I don't think it's broken," Takenaka said in a reserved tone.

"What makes you say that? You got some basis?"

"I wouldn't call it a 'basis,' but this might have been you know what—Toy Box."

"What's that?"

"It's rumored to be a phantom submarine that's absurdly large. It appears without a sound and disappears without a sound. It's terribly fast, too. A number of our ships already have encountered it, but all seem to have failed in pursuing it."

The "Improved-version Los Angeles class" used by the U.S. Navy were the most high-powered subs in the world, as was the Pasadena. It was no exaggeration to say that there were no targets



these submarines couldn't detect. But no single high-powered sub in this class had succeeded in pursuing Toy Box . . . ?

"That's very hard to swallow. You're saying what we just encountered was that 'Toy Box' or whatever?" balked Sailor.

"I do think the likelihood is high," affirmed Takenaka.

Sailor suddenly fell silent and tapped his temples with his index fingers. "I don't like the sound of that: a ship of unknown nationality that we can't detect, prowling around the ocean as it pleases? What if it's loaded with nuclear missiles—what do we do then?"

"Well . . ." For a moment, Takenaka was at a loss for words. "If that ghost ship felt like it, it could wipe out any city or military base in the world before anyone noticed it. That's what it means."

That alone probably would cause all-out nuclear war between the United States and the Soviets. Who in the world had created a ship like that? How could it be acceptable to allow such a ship to exist? Sailor stood up from his seat as though he'd reached a decision.

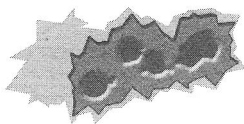
"We're sending headquarters a report," he declared. "Rise to periscope depth. I have something I need to do."

"Where are you going?" Takenaka inquired.

"The latrine!" Sailor revealed. Entrusting Takenaka with command, he left the command center.



Honestly, thought Takenaka as he walked along the narrow passageway, if what we just ran into really is that Toy Box thing, I'd love to see the look on Captain Sailor's face. He made such a fool out of me. He has the most warped personality—the worst kind of psycho bastard. Just you wait, Toy Box captain. Once I get the chance, I swear I'll make you wipe my ass good and clean—with your tongue, to boot!



The Same Time

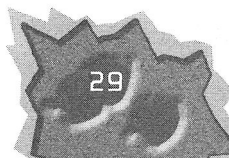
Amphibious Assault Submarine Tuatha de Danaan

“Is something the matter, captain?” asked Commander Mardukas, XO of the Tuatha de Danaan, when he noticed Tessa's back tremble.

“No, just an odd chill. Maybe the air conditioning is amiss,” Tessa replied.

“Is it? It's set just right for myself, but—”

“My imagination then. I'm sorry. It isn't a cold or anything.” Tessa forced herself to smile as her eyes fell upon the sea chart projected onto the screen next to her.





Tessa—Captain (and Colonel) Teletha Testarossa, a girl of only sixteen years old, sat in the captain's chair. She had big gray eyes, skin as white as porcelain, and ash blonde hair that was neatly tied in a braid.

The assault submarine Tuatha de Danaan's command center, which Tessa commanded, was different from the Pasadena's, and far more spacious. Its structure was similar to a small, low-ceilinged version of control rooms often seen on TV when rockets were launched. Light was somewhat dim, and blue and green images illuminated the room. Situated at the front of the room were three large screens, and facing those were fifteen seats.

The crew members each carried out specialized tasks, and they included a helmsman and navigation officer, an underwater navigator and a fire control officer, an engineer and a specialized engineer, a deck officer, and various others. There also were several crewmen who took seats when necessary to control landing operations after surfacing.

The room for sonar (the ears of the ship) and communications and electronic warfare was next door. A report announced by sonarman Petty Officer Dejrani sounded from the room: "Conn, sonar. Conn, sonar. Our friend the Pasadena is surfacing. Wow, it



looks like they're about to go through the thermal layer. Doesn't look like they noticed we were right behind them. Ha ha."

Mardukas raised his eyebrows but said nothing. He fought the urge to tell Dejirani off, instead pushing up the bridge of his glasses with his index finger. *No, this isn't the Royal Navy I was in. Patience, patience,* he repeated silently in an attempt to pacify himself.

Sitting next to him, Tessa exhibited no signs of being offended by the sonarman's attitude, but was fiddling with the pen next to her. The detailed data regarding the Pasadena that was displayed on the screen in front of her was minimized into a corner. "Yes, good work," she said. "We were a little mean to the Pasadena. Hopefully, she isn't heartbroken."

"That wouldn't be possible. If it were me, I suppose my pride would be grievously wounded," replied Mardukas. Commander Richard Mardukas was a thin man in his mid-forties who still wore his baseball-style cap from his days in the British Navy on top of his thinning hair. "S-87 HMS TURBULENT" was embroidered on the navy blue cap. Her Majesty's Ship Turbulent was the name of the submarine he used to command, but the word "turbulent" did not describe this man's appearance. With dull silver-rimmed glasses and pale skin, he hardly was the image of a man of the sea. He was



more the type one would find on a packed commuter train than in a submarine's command center.

"Pride? Do you really think so?" asked Tessa.

"Aye," assured Mardukas.

"But that can't be helped. We have no partner for practice exercises."

"That's true."

Mithril, the military organization to which this craft belonged, had four battle groups across the world. Among those, Tuatha de Danaan was in charge of operations in the West Pacific—but unfortunately, this battle group had no other submarines. With no regular exercise partners, the Tuatha de Danaan usually would locate U.S. naval ships and perform approach, attack, surveillance, and evasion tests. It often would complete the tests by secretly approaching and evading their target without it noticing. But occasionally, the need would arise to use these tactics in a more aggressive manner. Being a one-sided practice partner was unbearable for the recipient, however.

"We get results, though. Perhaps it would be best to decrease the volume of our normal propulsion," suggested Mardukas.

"Yes, perhaps. Although, they still wouldn't have found us for ten seconds," Tessa complained as she glanced up at the ceiling.



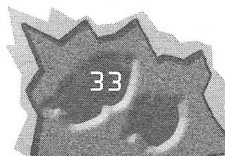
It had been only a short time since Tuatha de Danaan had gone to sea. Its crew had experienced actual combat a few times, but several items still required testing and equipment needed to be improved. In order to put the ship's abilities to the test, these kinds of issues were unavoidable.

Although Tuatha de Danaan was the name of the ship, it also was the name of the battle group. It was a small-scale force, so treating Tuatha de Danaan as a ship-equivalent squadron was sufficient. That made Tessa a ship captain *and* a battle group leader. In operations during which delicacy and swiftness were important, it was important for authority to be focused.

Ultimately, the test ended in success, and the Pasadena left. It was a good time to end the three-day voyage and return to Merida, where their island servicing base was located.

"We may as well head home, too. Set the EMFC to passive and reactivate normal propulsion. Ahead at standard speed," commanded Tessa. It was almost too gentle a voice to be commanding the most high-tech submarine in the world, but that couldn't be helped.

Mardukas repeated his superior officer's commands. "Aye, captain. EMFC: passive."





"EMFC station. Passive mode, aye. Now suppressing turbulence. Fifteen . . . ten . . . five . . . All devices: phase correction complete."

"Normal propulsion, contact."

"Maneuvering. Normal propulsion, aye. Number one, ready. Number two, ready. Normal propulsion, contact."

"Ahead at standard speed."

"Full ahead standard. Aye."

As each duty station replied, the pair of pitch screws the *Danaan* was equipped with rotated. The ten-odd layers of memory alloy the propellers were made of changed shape like a living creature and were ideal for silence and propulsion efficiency. The ship, which easily exceeded thirty thousand tons, began to move forward swiftly. The floor hardly shook, and there was practically no sound.

"Captain, we're now at thirty knots," proclaimed Mardukas.

"All right, this will do for now. Sonar room, please pay attention to the vicinity of bearing zero-five-zero," Tessa commanded. "A Japanese fishing boat is currently operating in that area."

"Aye, ma'am. Why?" asked the sonarman.

"Occasionally, there are accidents caused by getting caught in fishing nets. We would be fine, but the other boat would capsize."



It was true. It was an accident involving something even a veteran captain couldn't avoid. But no navy in the world would officially admit to that kind of accident.

"Ah, makes sense. Roger," radioed the sonarman agreeably.

As he listened to the exchange, Mardukas was overcome with curiosity. *It's gotten very smooth*, he thought.

When the de Danaan was first put to sea, nearly all the crew opposed Teletha Testarossa. It was no surprise, either. What kind of world was it in which a very young girl could be made a ship captain by a military organization? Further, the individual crew members of the de Danaan, who had been assembled from all over the world, each were excellent professionals in their respective spheres. Although they were practically all scoundrels thrown out of regular militaries, they harbored extraordinary pride in operating the ship.

Mardukas thought back to the time when Tessa had been introduced to the main crew. Oh, the faces they'd made when he'd announced, "I'm the executive officer. The captain is this lady here." Their eyes had looked as though they'd heard him say something along the lines of, "The Roman Pope has emigrated to China." Although she had confronted several obstacles since then, the crews' current impression of her had changed immensely.



The Sunan incident four months ago had been especially decisive. Tessa's command of the ship surely could have been called miraculous. She had operated the huge sub like a jet fighter through a hail of depth charges dropped by North Korean boats, admirably breaking through the blockade line. As the person who had redesigned the ship, she knew her craft well and was probably the only one who could push its abilities to the limit. Her skills and bravery were enough to astound Mardukas, who had been on submarines for twenty-five years. Now that her merit had been proven, a rare atmosphere had swept over the de Danaan.

On typical submarines, with only men aboard, it was natural for a strictly patriarchal society to form. The captain—in other words, the father—was the absolute power. But the de Danaan was more of a matriarchal society with Tessa at the top. The men obeyed her and felt fulfilled when they protected her. The princess was beautiful and wise like a goddess. The Tuatha de Danaan, or “peoples of the goddess Danu,” was aptly named, as it reflected the gods of Celtic mythology.

“The EMFC is also satisfactory. If we keep going like this, we should be at the base by noon,” Mardukas stated, looking at the detailed data shown on his personal display.



“Good. Now we can have the birthday party. Besides, a guest is scheduled to come to the island tomorrow,” Tessa replied in good humor.

“Which refers to whom?”

“Miss Kaname Chidori. I told Sergeant Sagara to bring her to Merida when it was convenient for her, because I’ve hardly spoken to her since the Behemoth incident.”

“Is that so?” Mardukas always noticed the joyfulness in Tessa’s voice when she mentioned anything to do with Sergeant Sagara. Ever since engaging in combat with the giant Arm Slave two months ago, she often mentioned the young sergeant, probably without even realizing it. Mardukas didn’t know that much about Sergeant Sousuke Sagara, but he had heard that he was an excellent and very responsible NCO. He was a member of the Special Response Team (SRT), an elite team of the de Danaan’s land forces, and was currently on a mission in Tokyo. He also was the only one who could pilot the Arbalest, a special AS on the de Danaan.

Mardukas likely would speak directly with Sergeant Sagara and evaluate him soon. Depending on the situation, there might be a need to send him off to another post to distance him from Tessa. Mardukas didn’t mean to act like her father, but it was his job as



executive officer to prevent the odd distraction. Mardukas already had confiscated a mountain of photos of Captain Testarossa from the ship's crew and ground combat personnel. Incinerating them seemed harsh, so they were placed in the care of the ship's medic, Lieutenant Goldberry.

An hour after they began cruising on standard propulsion, the de Danaan's mother AI sounded a small alarm to get the captain's attention. "Captain, tasking message on channel E2—now receiving," the AI announced in a woman's voice.

"Understood. Send it to me once it's finished," ordered Tessa.

"Aye, ma'am."

Receiving a telegram using Extremely Low-Frequency (ELF) communication in the deep sea took a bit of time. After about five minutes, the message was transferred to the captain's screen.

Tessa read it and sighed a little. "Mr. Mardukas . . ."

"Yes, captain?"

"Our return to base has been put on hold, along with the party. We are to proceed south," she said, passing the new telegram to Mardukas. The pre-deciphered telegram contained concise orders from Mithril's operations head:



Priority order (98H088-0031)

260115Z

*From = Operations Integrated Command Headquarters / Operations head
Admiral Gerome Voda*

To = TDD-1 Tuatha de Danaan

A: Occurrence of [Situation B26c] in area L6-CW.

B: Tuatha de Danaan to immediately cease current mission. After loading land forces, advance to ocean area N 09° 30', E 134° 00' within 50 hours, then stand by.

C: Permission given to rendezvous with land forces north of N 17° 00" at sea in a timely manner.

D: Prepare onboard land forces for scope and specifications of Situation B26c particulars.

E: ROE (Rules Of Engagement), maintain peace until further orders.

—End

“Good grief, the admiral is rigid in dealing with people,” Tessa exclaimed.

“Our objective region is the Perio Archipelago,” said Mardukas without opening his sea chart.

The Perio Archipelago was a beautiful coral reef island chain far to the south. Only a few years ago, it had become independent and



adopted the appearance of a republic—but in reality, it was under American protection. Its population was just shy of twenty thousand; it was a small nation that had gotten by on its tourist trade.

Mardukas was unable to quickly recall what Situation B26c referred to. This was because Mithril's supposed "military crises" numbered more than one hundred categories, even when loosely divided. Recurring case numbers were one thing, but he never could memorize all of them.

Tessa was seemingly different. Before Mardukas could open his data file to check, she muttered, "It concerns chemical weapons. It means a storage facility has been attacked and occupied by some armed group."

Chemical weapons: mass murder weapons exemplified by sarin, tabun, and the VX nerve agent. Although there weren't many, some U.S. bases still remained in the Republic of Perio even after it had become independent. Mardukas remembered reading somewhere that among them was a facility for dismantling and disposing of special warheads. This southern paradise that flourished during tourist season was a poison gas storehouse, and a terror group had occupied it.

"This is not encouraging news," lamented Mardukas. "If that chemical weapons storehouse were to explode—"

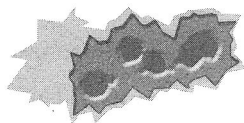


"Yes, the twenty thousand inhabitants of the Perio Archipelago, and tens of thousands of tourists, would not go unaffected. That small country could be wiped out," Tessa said.

"However, the U.S. military probably would carry out a suppression operation. There are always some who are prepared for something like this. I wonder if gaining control would be difficult if an AS-equipped special forces unit were sent in."

"It would be nice if that could settle it, but if something went wrong . . ." Tessa stopped speaking and scowled at the screen in front of her.

"Then it's our turn. This is war again," declared Mardukas.

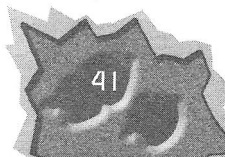


August 26, 13:30 (Japan Standard Time)

Over the Pacific Ocean

77 Miles Southwest of Iwo Jima

Sousuke Sagara was nervous. They had made a connecting flight and were en route to Mithril's West Pacific base, Merida Island, which was five hundred seventy-nine miles south of Tokyo.





Their altitude was about ten thousand seven hundred sixty-seven feet.

Sousuke was sitting in the twin-engine turbo prop's cabin. The plane vibrated noisily a bit during the flight, and strong sunlight shone in from the window facing him. Because of the glare, he couldn't read the expression of Kaname Chidori, who was sitting facing him. He suspected that she was in a bad mood, but he couldn't understand why. *It's puzzling*, he thought.

When Sousuke had gone to pick her up at her apartment that morning, Kaname had been in a very good mood, holding her overnight bag filled with extra clothes and sporting an extra-wide smile. "Okay, let's go!" she had exclaimed in lively tone.

When he had explained that they would go to Chofu Airport in the city and board a Cessna that had been booked, she had proclaimed in amazement, "Don't tell me you're really rich or something, Sousuke!"

By the time the Cessna took off for Hachijojima, it was obvious to anyone that Kaname was completely ecstatic. She had frequently expressed praise toward Sousuke with statements such as "I misjudged you" and "I never knew you were this resourceful," after which she would gaze out the window, fixated on the scenery outside.



The problem had arisen at Hachijojima's airport, where they had switched to a twin-engine plane bound for Mithril's base. Apparently, Kaname had thought they were going to spend their time at Hachijojima or somewhere nearby, so she had asked blankly, "We're switching planes?"

Sousuke had thought it was about time to reveal their actual destination to Kaname when he said, "We're going to Mithril's West Pacific base. Colonel Testarossa wishes to see you."

Suddenly, Kaname had stopped talking. She murmured "Oh, really . . ." after which she said nothing for hours.

This is strange. Did I make some horrible blunder? Sousuke had thought to himself, but he couldn't recall anything. After having worried nonstop, he cleared his throat and spoke to her as the plane passed the N 20° latitude.

"Chidori . . ."

"What do you *need*, Sergeant Sagara, sir?" An air of spite hung heavily in the air.

"If you're unhappy about something, I want you to tell me. I'll do whatever's in my power to help."

"Ah, in that case . . ." Kaname had said, smiling but full of cynicism. "What is making me unhappy is something you're powerless to do anything about. Let's leave it at that."



Sousuke had lost his ground. Once they had met with Colonel Teletha Testarossa, he'd planned to take Kaname to a certain place—but the way things were now, it seemed best to give up on that plan.

Kaname had all but said, "There's nothing else to talk about." She turned her upper body to look out the window in a position that caused her earrings to reflect the sunlight and sparkle brilliantly.

Does she usually wear earrings? Sousuke tried to remember.

The copilot had peeked into the cabin from the cockpit and announced, "Sergeant Sagara: communication from Merida Island for you."

"On my way! Chidori, I'll be leaving my seat for a bit," Sousuke had announced, but Kaname didn't answer. Grimacing, Sousuke had kept his head low upon entering the cockpit and took the radio headset from the copilot. "This is Sagara."

"Hey, it's me." The transmission was a little choppy, but the baritone voice carried well; it was Sousuke's colleague, Sergeant Kurz Weber.

"Kurz, what is it?"

"We got B standby orders. We have them for you, too. They say to join up with the de Danaan while it's at sea ASAP. We're about to head out via helicopter."



Sousuke had felt as though he wanted to wail. *Standby orders at a time like this?*

He and Kurz, members of the land combat forces, were not always onboard the Tuatha de Danaan. They normally lived on land for training and other missions, and when necessary, would be called onto the ship to stand by. Various things could happen once they were aboard. They might actually fight, or they might have to wait for several days and then end up doing nothing.

As orders to board the de Danaan at sea and stand by had been issued, Kurz and those on Merida Island would rendezvous with the ship by helicopter. But as Sousuke had been en route to the island, it didn't look as if he could get on that heli.

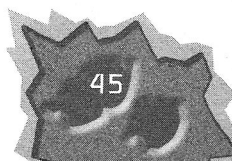
"We can wait about twenty minutes. Think you'll make it?" Kurz had asked.

"Impossible. It will still take more than two hours to reach the island."

"That just leaves *that way* again. Don't catch a cold. No, guess you wouldn't. Ha ha ha."

"I don't mind. The problem is Kaname. What should we do?"

"Oh, right. Tessa's in the middle of the ocean."





"We could have Kaname wait on Merida Island, or else have her go straight back." Sousuke broke into a cold sweat.

Kaname was, at best, in a bad mood. To now tell her, "Something urgent has come up—kill time at the base" or "Sorry, but you need to go back to Tokyo" . . . ? How could he say such things to her when he was the one who had invited her in the first place?

"Do I need to get on board no matter what? There're others there. The colonel could make do this once—"

"Uh, hold on a sec. Huh? What's that, girl?"

Sousuke could hear Kurz whispering with someone on the other end of the wireless.

After waiting patiently, he heard Kurz come back. "A message just came in. Looks like it's from Tessa. It says, 'If Kaname is agreeable, please bring her with you to the ship.' We're good then, huh? You have permission for a civilian to board, so bring her with you."

"We make Kaname do *that*?" Sousuke exclaimed. The way to independently board the de Danaan while it was at sea was a bit unique.

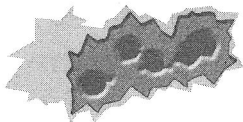
"She can handle it. *That*, anyway."

"Hmm . . ."



Of course, it was somewhat worrisome to put Kaname onboard a warship about to initiate an operation. But depending on how you looked at it, the inside of the ultra-high-powered de Danaan potentially was the safest place in the world. There probably was no need to put so much thought into it.

"We'll bring her along then," Sousuke answered. After making two or three small arrangements, he ended the transmission.



Meanwhile, Kaname was in ill humor. The day before yesterday, when she had first accepted Sousuke's invitation, she had been worried that maybe the two of them alone together really was a bad idea. It hadn't seemed as though any strange problems would arise, but she had a feeling that on this trip they would end up crossing some invisible line.

It wasn't merely *some* trip, either. Going on a long trip alone with a boy was a truly serious affair in the life of a typical sixteen-year-old girl. It was way different than going to an amusement park on a Sunday, and the fact that her counterpart was Sousuke made it a far weightier matter. The way in which she'd told him off at school,



acted like his big sister, and looked after him “because it can’t be helped”—it was a strange sensation to think that such a relationship would not only subtly but *completely* change. Becoming closer might destroy a presently comfortable place.

As her thoughts jumbled, the inside of her chest tightened. *I should just cancel*, she had thought several times. But when the night before came around, her mental state had changed. She’d excitedly put her clothes and toiletry set in the bag when she realized she was humming to herself. *Well, what happens happens. That’s good enough*, she had thought as she sincerely began to look forward to the trip. *Don’t make this difficult. Just have as much fun with him as possible. Eat a lot of good food. I’ll just let things take their course. If he starts to have weird expectations, well . . . what to do? No, I’m not that easy. But if the mood’s right . . . No, forget that. This is tricky. Heh heh beh . . .*

That morning when she’d set out, she’d also gone through similar psychological ups and downs. And when she’d been told, “I want you to see Colonel Testarossa” at Hachijojima, she had been overcome by an inescapable feeling of exhaustion.

Oh, so that’s what this is, she had understood. *It’s another Mithril mission. That precious girl of yours asked, and you’re just delivering me like some parcel to that weird island. So basically, I was an idiot for getting so worked up, alternating between*



being happy and worrying about so much these past two days? Kaname was in an unbelievably miserable mood.

Sousuke was talking with someone over the radio in the cockpit. It was noisy, and the dialogue was spoken rapidly in English, so Kaname was unsure of what was being said.

When he returned to the cabin, Sousuke sat down looking troubled.

"So what happened?" Kaname asked in a somewhat-forced curt voice.

Sousuke glanced at her and said, "Actually, plans have changed."

"Oh, have they?"

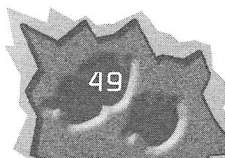
"Something urgent came up, and the colonel is not on Merida Island."

"And?"

"If it's all right with you, I want us both to go to the ship that she's on."

"Huh?"

"Ship"—she had a feeling she had heard about that before. Mithril, the top-secret high-tech mercenary group Sousuke was based out of, had an assault . . . some kind of ship, and Tessa was the captain of it—or something.

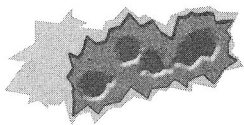




It was true, Kaname had felt the need to see Tessa for some time. Tessa knew something about the secret hidden inside Kaname. But since the explosive disturbance that had happened in Ariake before finals last semester, she'd only spoken with Tessa a few times over the telephone.

"Okay, whatever. That works," answered Kaname indifferently.

"That's a relief. Stand by for now," Sousuke said before returning to the cockpit.



Sousuke frequently moved between the cockpit and the cabin. He took a large bag off a rack in the cabin, messed with the radio in the cockpit, and talked about something with the pilot.

After two hours had passed since their destination had changed course, Sousuke asked Kaname, "Do you have a swimsuit?"

"Huh?" *What is he talking about all of a sudden? Are we no longer going to the island?* she wondered. "Well, yeah, I do."

"Change into it. You can use the rear of the cabin."

"What's the big deal? Wa—"

"Hurry. We don't have time," Sousuke said as he walked toward the cockpit in an unusually rushed manner.



With nothing else to do, Kaname entered the bathroom at the rear of the cabin and quickly changed into her swimsuit. It was a one-piece that was black with orange stripes. She also had brought a white bikini, but the urge to wear it in front of Sousuke had long since vanished. When she returned to the cabin with a bath towel over her suit, Sousuke was putting on a wet suit directly over his street clothes.

"What's going on?"

"Sorry, there weren't any wet suits in your size."

"No, that's not what I meant."

"Put your luggage in this bag. All of it." Sousuke briskly pushed an olive bag toward Kaname. "Once you finish loading it, close the fasteners—it has two, so make sure they're both tight. You'd better put that towel inside, too. And if you can, tie your hair back."

"Uh, hey, please explain—"

"Sarge!" called the pilot. Sousuke once again entered the cockpit. Not understanding why, Kaname put her things inside the olive bag.

"All done?" Sousuke asked as he reentered the cabin.

"Yeah, but why do I have to—?"

"That bag's completely watertight. It's also made to withstand strong impacts." While saying things that made very little sense, Sousuke opened



another bag and hurriedly put on what was inside. It was a strangely shaped backpack with a sturdy belt and metal fittings attached.

"Uh, is that by any chance—"

"You put this on. Hurry! No, I'll do it. There's no time."

"Ho-ahh! What're you *doing*?"

Sousuke had attached the clunky belt and fittings to Kaname as she looked on blankly in amazement. His rubber glove-clad hands brushed over her arms, shoulders, legs, and butt. Turning bright red, she was about to protest.

"Sarge! One minute!"

"I know!"

"We don't have the fuel for a retry!"

"I know. It's all right!"

Overpowered by the oddly tense exchange, Kaname unconsciously shut her mouth. Sousuke pulled roughly on the fittings and belt attached to her, ensuring that they were tight enough.

"Ow! Hey, what the hell are we—"

"Thirty seconds!" the pilot shouted.

"Thanks! See you later!" Sousuke replied.

"Huh? 'See you later?' Uh, wait . . ." said the extremely confused

Kaname.



Sousuke went around behind her and attached his own metal fittings to hers with a click. They were tightly conjoined, as though they were in a *nininbaori* comedy act.

“What? Hey! What are you . . . ?” Kaname exclaimed.

Sousuke had all the gear, including the bag with luggage inside, attached to him. As if carrying Kaname, he walked in long strides to the right side of the cabin.

“Uh . . .”

The copilot turned the lever on the wall next to the hatch. The sliding hatch opened instantly, and a strong gust swirled around inside the plane.

“Ugh!”

The engine noise grew increasingly louder as the cold wind howled intensely. Only the horizon where the blue sky met the water and the sea surface far below were visible. Tokyo Tower was one thing, but this altitude was enough to cause dizziness.

Sousuke hurled a smoke marker outside the plane to check the wind direction. After he gave the copilot the thumbs up, he patted Kaname on the shoulder and said, “Okay, here we go, Chidori!”

“Here we *don’t* go—this plane’s still in the air!” she dissented.

“Of course.”



Kaname struggled to try to move farther back into the plane, but because she was attached to Sousuke by the belt, she was unable to move in the way she wanted to. "What are you doing? Hey, don't tell me we're going to jump out of here—"

"Affirmative," shouted Sousuke—and with a great heave, he jumped out of the plane with Kaname.

As the floor disappeared from under their feet, the sensation of her organs simultaneously rushing to the top of her head swept over Kaname. "Aaaiiieee!" She knew she was screaming, but her voice was erased by the violent wind, and it hardly reached her own ears. The image of the propeller plane still was visible from the corner of her eye, but it quickly grew smaller. The world was one color: blue. Everywhere—the transparent sky, the sparkling ocean, and the sun. There really was nothing else. "Ahhh!"

Sousuke and Kaname were the only things in the pure blue world, a world just for them. *How wonderful would it be if there were gravity here?* she thought. She felt as though she could forgive everything up until that point—even how she was being forced to seemingly jump to her death with Sousuke.

The very instant her mind was overcome with feelings of forgiveness, Kaname was struck by a strong shock, after which her body was violently lifted up.



Actually, the parachute had just opened. The all-blue world vanished, concealed by the olive parachute over her head. The wind that had been beating her nearly naked body died down, and a gentle breeze tousled her hair. Dangling from the parachute, Sousuke and Kaname slowly began to descend.

"We're dead," Kaname muttered as she gazed down at the sea. There was no trace of the ship Sousuke had talked about. Before long, they reached the water.

"Listen, Chidori. Just before we hit land, I'll detach the parachute. Take a deep breath."

"Why?" Kaname barely managed to ask.

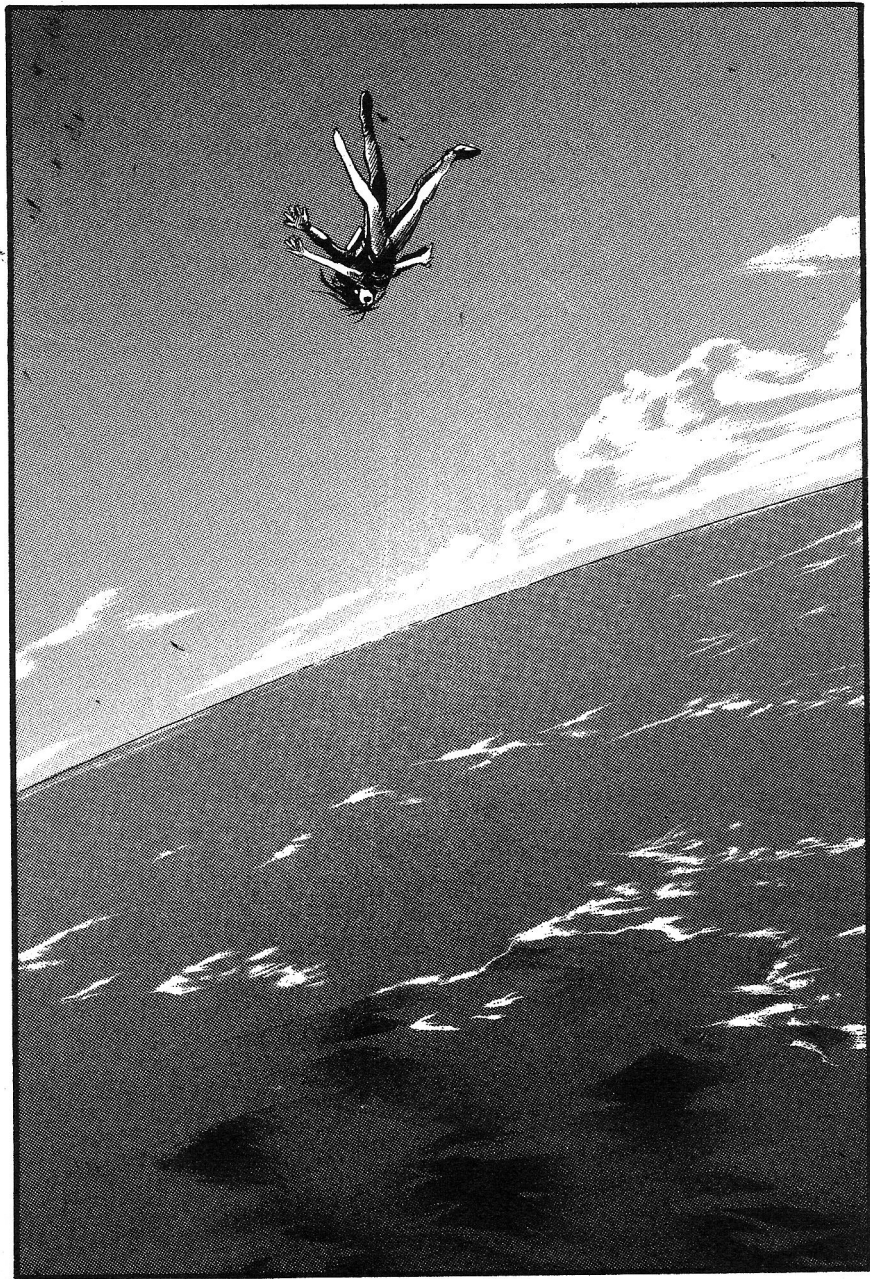
"So we don't drown. In three . . . two . . ."

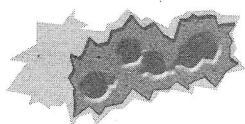
They already had dropped to the height of several building stories. The shapes of waves were clearly discernible.

"Detaching," Sousuke announced.

Although Kaname felt as if she wanted to cry, she instead filled her lungs with air as ordered. The parachute detached with a snap, and they plunged directly into the ocean.

Upon final impact, seawater and bubbles engulfed Kaname's body. However, the water was not as cold as she had braced herself for.





August 26, 06:38 (Greenwich Mean Time)

Western Pacific Ocean, Depth: 323 Feet

Tuatha de Danaan

“Command center, this is sonar. We detected human-sized entry sounds, bearing three-one-seven. Distance is estimated to be five hundred yards,” the sonarman reported to Tessa.

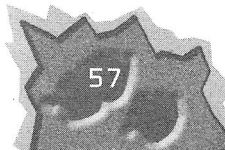
“All right, that is more or less what we planned. Maintain heading. Please decelerate to three knots.”

“Speed: three knots. Aye, ma’am.” The slowly cruising hull decelerated in order to recover Sousuke and Kaname, who’d just splashed down.

“Please send out a turtle, and give the controls to Mr. Goddard,” ordered Tessa.

“Aye-aye. Launching turtle one to starboard.” The deck officer grabbed the stick and flipped the switch.

Turtles were small unmanned, wire-controlled craft with which the ship was equipped. Their size and shape were similar to that of sea turtles,





and they were loaded with communication equipment and optical sensors. Through the application of AS technology, they also were able to use fins to swim noiselessly. They were swimming periscopes, so to speak. Utilizing these, the de Danaan was able to freely investigate the ocean's surface.

This particular turtle was programmed to swim to Sousuke's and Kaname's location. If they were to don diving gear and grab hold of the turtle, they could be brought into the ship as it cruised. The turtle would be brought alongside an open hatch, they would enter an airtight chamber, and recovery would be complete. This was an operation the other group members had carried out a number of times. Surfacing the entire submarine to recover only one or two people was inefficient and risky. Incidentally, the other land combat personnel, helicopter and all, had been recovered when the sub surfaced an hour prior.

"This is sonar. The people who splashed down are struggling on the surface," said the sonarman in a tense voice.

"What's going on?" asked Tessa.

"They might be drowning. There's the sound of violent splashing and screaming. This isn't good."

The command center crew grew tense. It was common for wet parachutes to wrap around jumpers, causing them to drown after they hit the water.



"Oh no. Have a diver stand by at hatch twelve. Tell him to be ready immediately to—"

"Uh, wait a minute. They're shouting something. That's a voice in . . . Japanese? I'm patching the audio through. Please give a listen." When the sonarman connected the circuit, the sound in question resounded through the command center's speakers. It certainly was the sound of limbs thrashing violently. They also could hear a voice that sounded as though it were screaming. Tessa held her breath and listened carefully to the shouting voices.

The de Danaan's super high-powered sonar system picked up:

"Stop it, Chidori! Goho!"

"What for? You can just drown to death for all I care!"

Glub. "Don't . . . strangle me!"

"Shut up! Have you ever given the slightest thought to how I feel, you inhuman creep? You're *disgusting!* I *hate* you!"

Glubb.

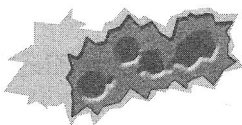
Mardukas, who stood beside Tessa, scanned her eyes in search of a decision. He didn't know Japanese, so he couldn't follow Sousuke's and Kaname's dialogue. It was the same for almost all the rest of the crew. They all stared at Tessa's face as she leaned forward in the captain's chair. The same question was



written on all their faces: "Why is the captain just sitting there, not helping them?"

"Captain?"

"Just leave them be," Tessa said sullenly as she sat back down in her chair.



After much fuss, Kaname was forced to put on the awkward diving gear, grab onto the weird robot turtle, and dive through the water with Sousuke. A giant submarine awaited them underwater. To Kaname, the Tuatha de Danaan appeared to be a ball of wonder. Smooth curves along its expanse made it seem capable of flight.

The dazzling light radiating downward from the surface created a silhouette of the rising hull that somewhat resembled the shape of a throwing knife. Of course, because its size was so large, Kaname was a bit unsure whether it actually was that shape at all. The closer she and Sousuke got, the more overwhelmed she was by the size. It must have been as big as a Shinjuku skyscraper. A better description might have been a black mountain turned on its side in the sea.



Sousuke led Kaname by the hand and entered the hatch in the middle of the hull. As they waited in the cramped cylindrical airtight chamber, the remainder of ocean water was extracted with a gurgle, and Kaname was finally free from the mouthpiece that reeked of rubber.

"Ugh! I never heard anything about a submarine." Kaname coughed lightly, clenching her fists and then loosening them. She didn't understand why, but her fingertips felt painfully numb.

"I thought I told you several times. Also, you've been on it once before," insisted Sousuke.

"Oh?"

"It's true. We used a more difficult method of boarding, though—and you were unconscious."

Kaname fell silent.

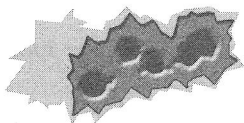
Sousuke opened the hatch in the floor, and the pair climbed down the ladder and stood on the deck below. There awaited a girl with ash blonde hair, wearing a khaki-colored uniform.

"Tessa?"

"Yes. Long time, no see," Tessa replied, tilting her head with a smile. "Welcome, Miss Kaname Chidori. You have permission to board."



Thus, Kaname finally achieved her second boarding of the amphibious assault submarine Tuatha de Danaan.



August 26, 16:25 (Perio Standard Time)
Berildaobu Island, Republic of Perio, Western Pacific
American Military Chemical Weapons Disposal Facility

The explosion of the attack helicopter brightly illuminated the coral reef under the evening sky. The flame-engulfed fuselage spun wildly, losing its momentum as it fell, and then crashed into the ocean surface, where it scattered.

Enter the roar of a machine cannon, the sound of bullets whizzing past, a military craft in flames, and thick black smoke muddying the air. On the beach of this islet that had become a battlefield, a single dark blue Arm Slave—an M6A3 Dark Bushnell—was grounded. It was a high-grade mech based out of the SEALs, the U.S. Navy's special forces. Or rather, it used to be based with them. Its limbs askew at grotesque angles, the eighty-six-foot-tall humanoid weapon was seriously damaged.



Metallic guts and macromolecular gel blood could be seen strewn all around it.

Beyond the raging explosions and roar of cannons merged the angry bellows and exclamations of the soldiers participating in the suppression operation. Before long, their sounds of anger devolved into screams of despair.

"This is Echo Eighty-Four. I've been hit! Mayday! Mayday!"

"They got my leg! Someone give me backup!"

"Goddamn that red bastard. He took down Bob!"

"—oyed. Repeat, November One was destroyed! The lieutenant's dead. November Three assumes further command—"

"Eject! Just get out of there!"

"Help me, somebody! Help me, help me!"

In spite of hearing his comrades' screams over the radio, Petty Officer First Class Ed Olmos hardly had any time to pay attention to their words. The AS he piloted—an M6A3—raced down the concrete-reinforced beach. There were no allies around him. The two other mechs in Olmos' squad already had been destroyed. Both their operators had top-class skills, having gone through intense training and being chosen for the elite military group. Despite all that, they had been killed all too quickly by only one AS—an unidentified red AS.



“Impossible. As if something this impossible could ever happen. Shit!” Inside the cockpit, Olmos turned pale with disbelief. He couldn’t stop sweating, and his teeth wouldn’t stop chattering. His dark eyes busily searched for his enemy. *Where is he?*

The M6A3 Dark Bushnell’s sensors still couldn’t pick up the enemy mech. What its eyes did reflect were the thick black smoke, his allies’ wreckage, and several partially destroyed buildings.

Where is it? Where’s that red . . . Ahead of him, a sudden gust kicked up. Relying on his fine-tuned reflexes, Olmos made his mech leap to the side. The flying rocket grazed his left side. Something exploded behind him—but not faltering at the shock wave, he aimed at the hazy silhouette and fired forty-millimeter rounds from his mech’s carbine rifle. The resulting smoke swallowed the trails of white light. Although the three rapid-fire bursts should have hit, there was no reaction.

The enemy mech appeared, pushing through the smoke and approaching at high speed. It was a dark red AS. Creating a slender but sturdy silhouette, the upper body of the AS was shaped like an inverted triangle, and its head was shaped like a diamond. If he had to choose, it looked like a Western-style AS, but it was a model Olmos had never seen in any catalog. Its outward appearance had an



air of elegance—but at the same time, the AS seemed to possess a strangely sinister power. Oddly enough, the enemy mech was laughing as though it were scoffing at Olmos through its external speakers.

“You son of a bitch!” Olmos lost it and charged forward with a roar. He aimed his high-powered grenade launcher at the enemy and fired. There were explosions at point-blank range, close enough to affect his mech. Then, aiming where the enemy had been, he fired off the remainder of his rifle’s ammo.

There’s no way the mech will get through all that unbarmed, Olmos thought.

Immediately afterward, the enemy mech appeared amid the violent storm of explosive flames and shrapnel. It was completely undamaged, in spite of such a brutal attack.

“No . . .”

Facing the dumbstruck Olmos, the red mech said, “Out of ammo? You should conserve your resources.”

“B-b-b . . . ?”

“By the way, you’re the last one. Some of them cried and begged for their lives—but hey, you did well, soldier.”

“Fuck you!” The Dark Bushnell threw away its empty rifle, instead drawing a small model handgun from its hip equipment mount. He quickly aimed at the enemy mech’s head and fired. The



bullet bounced away in midair, as though it had hit a transparent shield. Beyond where red sparks scattered, the red mech stood calmly. “Wha—?”

The red AS extended its index finger and waved it back and forth before the flustered Olmos. “Tch tch tch . . . no, no. I’ll show you how it’s done. Ready?” It pointed its index finger in the shape of a pistol barrel directly at Olmos’ mech.

Bang!

For a moment, the air distorted. An unseen power shot from the red AS’ fingertip and sped through the air. It was something unknown—not a bullet. It was something along the lines of a bizarre energy projectile that went through solid armor and made the Dark Bushnell’s cockpit and the body of its passenger explode.

Until the final second, Olmos still didn’t understand what had happened. The last Dark Bushnell of the suppression team lost its pilot and control system, collapsed on the spot, and ceased moving. There was not a single dent on the mech’s front armor. The rest of the enemy unit ran for it. Combat ended, and the man in the red AS took roll call.

There were ten subordinate Arm Slaves. Of those, one had been destroyed and one had lost its left arm. Of infantry and other



casualties, six were KIA, and ten were wounded. It was no small number of casualties, but when you considered that they were up against the American special forces, who boasted of having world-class ability, it actually was rather fortunate. All twelve enemy Arm Slaves had been taken out, half the helicopters and combat craft were destroyed. And as for the number of corpses left behind, there were at least two dozen that would not be returning to their native country.

A pity. Ah, stars and stripes forever.

"Now then . . ." He walked his own AS over to the base's chemical weapons storehouse. The outer wall had caught some stray rounds and was crumbling here and there. If one were to hear that this facility disposed of fatally poisonous chemical warheads, one would probably pale at the sight of this. But he didn't care at all. He knelt his mech down, getting out of his cockpit and onto the ground. Over the past several weeks, he had become very familiar with his artificial right leg. He was satisfied with his slaughter as he looked up at his resting mech.

This red AS was called Plan I058 by his organization; its nickname was Codarli. It was an improved version of the rather problematic Plan I056. The old Plan I056 had been lost along with his right leg four months ago in the mountains of North Korea.



"If only I'd been piloting this . . ." He remembered that combat—the fight with Mithril's white AS—and a menacing smile appeared upon his face.

"Gauron," a voice called out to him. A man approximately thirty years old with a large, burly build reminiscent of a hard-hitting hand-to-hand fighter approached. His race was indeterminate. He looked Latino, but also could have passed for Asian—that kind of face. His eyes looked sleepy, but at the same time, he gave off an aura characteristic of men whom nothing perturbed. The way his small round glasses rested softly upon his round nose somehow completed his unusual demeanor.

"Kurama, it's all over. Where'd you go?"

"Call from Mr. Zinc came in," Kurama answered bluntly, as if the combat that had just transpired made no impression on him at all.

"Hmm."

"It's like you said: Looks like they're coming."

"Oh?"

"Seems the submarine took the assault force on board at sea. It isn't just observation or surveillance, they look *serious*."

When he heard that, Gauron smiled as if he were satisfied.

"Hmm, they're so conscientious. They're taking the bait perfectly."



"In that case, it's rather extravagant bait." Kurama looked over the post-combat scene: the still burning Arm Slaves, combat helicopters, and U.S. troops scattered here and there. With the failure of this operation, higher-ups at the Pentagon probably would lose their jobs left and right.

"That's right. You know full well how much I love a show," said Gauron.

"That's true." Kurama took out a cigarette case, removing a cigarette-sized carrot stick from inside and taking a bite out of it.

"There's one other thing you should know: That beloved couple of yours—they might be onboard, too."

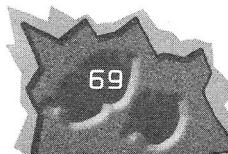
"Say what?"

"We aren't sure about that yet, but they don't seem to be in Tokyo anymore."

"Well, well. Good. Fantastic!"

"Don't get too happy. If the girl dies along with the Mithril people, it's all down the drain."

"I know. It's all right. I'll make sure she doesn't die." Gauron shook his head in heartfelt but somewhat crazed delight. He was, in fact, happy. There had been multiple things about this plan he didn't like. One of them was having to deal with that boy and





girl separately. However, the situation had recently become more appealing.

"Yeah, yeah. I'll be careful. I won't let her die. It's just . . ."

Gauron muttered.

"Just what?"

"Accidents can happen."



CHAPTER 2

Deep Sea Party

August 26, 08:07 (Greenwich Mean Time)

Western Pacific, Depth: 2,153 Feet

Tuatha de Danaan Infirmary

Tessa, who Kaname had not seen in a while, made a snazzier impression than before in a khaki uniform, tight knee-length skirt, and an indigo necktie that looked quite fetching. The last time they'd met, Tessa had been in a baggy T-shirt and cargo pants, so no matter how you looked at her, she didn't seem as though she were a captain or colonel.

Aba. She really is in the military. . . . Taking a good look at Tessa in front of her, Kaname felt a strange admiration.

"Wh-what is it?" Tessa took half a step back, wearing a bewildered look on her face.



"Uh, nothing. How've you been?"

"Well, thank you. You look . . . a bit worn out, Kaname."

Kaname was wrapped in a blanket, sitting on an infirmary bed and sipping cocoa. She had just finished a simple examination of her body temperature, pulse, and blood pressure.

The ship's medic who examined Kaname was a black woman who introduced herself as Lieutenant Goldberry. After examining Kaname and going on and on, saying such things as, "You're all better now" and "You're a tough one," Lieutenant Goldberry gave her certification of "no problems."

Meanwhile, Sousuke was standing at ease in front of the infirmary door, his posture still rigid. Kaname saw him out of the corner of her eye and said, "Well, sure. I was pushed out of an airplane, tossed into the ocean, forced to dive under. I'm so tired it's crazy, really."

A single drop of cold sweat formed on Sousuke's temple. "I'm sorry. Regular planes are unable to land on this submarine. I suspected it would be a little rough going."

"It's all right. I'd been thinking about seeing you. Besides, don't we have a lot to talk about?"

"Yes. There is that. But first, Sergeant Sagara?"



"Yes ma'am, colonel," responded Sousuke overly politely.

"Please go to the main hangar. Once there, could you let someone—it doesn't matter whom—know that it's time?"

"Understood." Although Sousuke showed signs of hesitation for a moment, he finally saluted and left the infirmary.

Kaname, who had watched their exchange, felt a bit uneasy. Tessa's and Sousuke's conversation had been thoroughly practical, and no odd inclination or implication was detectable.

Previously, the captain had declared to Kaname that she, Tessa, had fallen in love with Sousuke, and that she and Kaname should try their hardest to get along. This was problematic in itself, as Kaname hadn't especially had any inclinations toward Sousuke. From Kaname's standpoint, it had been more like, "Oh, right, knock yourself out," but—

It does bother me, she thought. After she finally had admitted that to herself, Kaname had found herself unable to relax whenever Sousuke was away from Tokyo on Mithril business. What do he and Tessa talk about when I'm not around? That they always would be together? Maybe in the ship's gym storehouse or something, away from prying eyes, they're all over each other. . . .

"Kaname?"



"Huh?" she replied, forced to put her strange delusions on hold.

"For now, could I have you change into plain clothes? I'll show you around the ship. There are several important points."

"S-sure. Just wait a sec." Kaname went to the rear of the infirmary and started changing. When she took off her swimsuit, her eyes stopped on her image reflected in the wall mirror.

In the mirror was the naked body of an attractive girl: smooth, supple skin, with her half-dried black hair coiled about her slender shoulders and ample bosom. She hugged her shoulders in an attempt to hide her breasts, arched her back slightly, drew in her chin, and cast a sidelong glance.

Oh, this is fairly, no, very . . . nice. She, of course, did not go so far as to say *voluptuous*, but even so, her figure was attractive. *At least I'm not going to lose. . . .* Having satisfied herself, suddenly what she was doing seemed stupid. She blushed and quickly finished changing. After putting on a deep blue one-piece, she tied her hair back with a red ribbon, put on sandals, and walked out.

As Kaname exited, Lieutenant Goldberry held out something. "Miss, put this on you before you go."

"What is it?" inquired Kaname, peering at a chewing gum stick-sized plastic plate.



"It's like litmus paper. When it's exposed to a high amount of neutrons, it reacts and changes color."

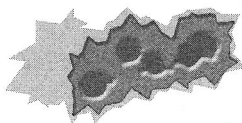
"N-neutrons?"

"If it turns orange, that's a danger signal—get away from engineering as quickly as possible. Later, when you leave the ship, return it to me."

Tessa expounded on the lieutenant's explanation from the side. "This ship's power source is a PS-type palladium reactor. That plate is a safety measure for a worst-case scenario. You really don't need to worry about it."

Kaname didn't know what to say.

"So, please come with me. Getting lost would not be good," Tessa said as she left the infirmary.



The Tuatha de Danaan's corridors were barely wide enough for Kaname and Tessa to walk next to each other, and the ceiling was low. The corridors were not even as wide as school hallways.

The first impression one got upon entering the craft and walking down these corridors was how jumbled up they were. Unconcealed



pipes and varieties of cables crawled along the walls and ceiling, and one could see various types of bulbs, levers, switches, and fireplugs here and there. The watertight hatches installed in various places were rough, thick, and sturdy, with huge handles attached. In other words, it wasn't much different than a typical submarine.

From the exterior, Kaname had imagined a kind of space battleship, similar to what would appear in SF anime—corridors with perfectly level walls and ceilings, for instance—and now this seemed somewhat anticlimactic.

"It's rather narrow," assessed Kaname.

Tessa, who had taken the lead, turned around and said, "Even so, these corridors are wide for a submarine. We considered the safety of crew who would have to run during emergencies. Clumsy people run into things and fall down—Ahh!" She probably shouldn't have been looking to the side. Tessa's shoulder hit a pipe jutting out from the wall. The impact spun her around, and she fell with her back to the floor.

"Hey, you okay?" asked Kaname.

"I-I'm fine. I can handle this much," Tessa answered with teary eyes.

As Kaname helped Tessa up, she said, "That was close. Are you really the captain?"



"It hurts to hear that. . . . This ship is like a home to me. Except for the crew's private matters, there isn't anything I don't know. For instance, the pipe I bumped into is service pipe number twenty-eight in system B8. When it was designed, there was no choice but to have it jut out of the wall due to the arrangement of other modules."

While offering an excuse that was somehow beside the point, Tessa continued to lead the way down the corridor. They passed through several doorways and down a flight of stairs.

The other intriguing thing about the submarine was its eerie calm. It was supposed to be cruising, but there was absolutely no engine sound, and the floor was not vibrating. It was even quieter than a running bullet train.

"That's the way it was built," Tessa answered when Kaname voiced her curiosity. "The nature of a submarine's stealth is its life, so noise is a powerful enemy. A noisy submarine can be detected by an enemy ship from far away. In modern warfare, engagements usually have begun from a distance greater than the naked eye can cover—but with the spread of ECS, surface and air combat are no longer that way."

"Hmm . . ." Kaname didn't understand about half of what Tessa said, but she chimed in anyway to indicate she was listening.



The strange thing was, she hardly saw anything of the crew working in the submarine. The corridors were quiet, and there was almost no indication of human presence. Once, she spotted a sour-faced young crewman, but he didn't greet the pair, instead disappearing down the corridor as if to avoid them—Kaname especially.

I don't really seem to be welcome here, Kaname thought, feeling increasingly nervous. She had some connections here, but at the end of the day, she simply was a young civilian woman. For an outsider to be on board their craft—well, no wonder they didn't like it.

"About how many people are on this ship?" asked Kaname.

"Right now, around two hundred forty. When necessary, it can accommodate more," Tessa answered.

"But I haven't seen anyone so far."

"Yes, well . . ." Tessa stopped speaking and walking. There, at a dead end in the passage, was a single watertight hatch. She stopped in front of it and cleared her throat with a cough. "You can speak English, Kaname?"

"Yeah, more or less." Kaname had been living in New York until three years ago. She was a bit rusty, but she still could pull off everyday conversation without a problem.

"Let us now switch over to it."



“Okay.”

“This way, then—though you may not really enjoy this kind of thing.” After her preface, Tessa pushed open the massive hatch and proceeded through the hatchway.

Finding it somewhat suspicious, Kaname passed through the hatchway and was startled as a gentle breeze suddenly brushed her cheeks. The smell of oil wafted into her nose, and an illumination filled her eyes. “Ah . . .”

Noonday brightness and a sprawling scene were before her. Compared to her school gymnasium, the ceiling was a little lower, but it had depth. There was a crane hanging from the ceiling, and a large screen arranged on the upper part of the wall. Things like fuel tanks for helicopters and AS rocket launchers were stowed in a line of metal frames.

And this was only the hangar; nearly two hundred crew stood in three orderly lines along the port side from where Kaname was positioned to the far back of the hangar. Their races and ages were diverse, and they wore a great variety of uniforms: khaki tops and bottoms similar to Tessa’s uniform, olive field uniforms, orange and blue fatigues, helicopter pilot flight suits, white medical gowns, and cooks, to name a few.



Behind these rows, six eighty-six-foot-tall humanoid weapons—Arm Slaves—formed similar rows as the humans. Their heads stopped just short of the ceiling. Kaname recognized the AS mechs. Five were a model called the M9, and the one farthest in back was the white mech Sousuke previously had piloted.

Beyond the AS rows, helicopters and fighter planes were neatly lined up. There was such an assemblage of soldiers and weapons in the hangar of the de Danaan that it was safe to call it a spectacle.

What are these people doing? Kaname thought suspiciously.

The middle-aged man standing nearby nodded in response to Tessa's glance. He was tall and thin, wore glasses, and had a somber air about him. He suddenly called out in an incredibly loud voice: "Attention!"

Kaname drew back in surprise.

Shifting their stance from being at ease to at attention, two hundred people and six mechs moved simultaneously.

"Eh?" Kaname wondered if she should stand at attention, too. She automatically backed off, and amid her confusion, the middle-aged man once again raised his voice.



“For facing numerous dangers with Captain Testarossa and our combat forces, for her extraordinary bravery and actions, as well as the kindness she has displayed, all present offer Miss Kaname Chidori their utmost gratitude.”

After taking a deep breath, he ordered, “Salute!”

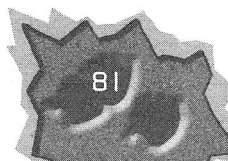
Everyone raised his right hand, and in the manner of their respective original armies, saluted sharply.

All eyes were focused on Kaname. Some faces remained serious, some smiled, some looked critical, and for some reason, some eyes appeared a bit moist.

Beyond the rows, Lieutenant Commander Kalinin, who wore an olive field uniform, was also visible. His injuries seemed to have mostly healed, and his large frame stood straight as he gave Kaname an honest salute.

The six AS mechs also were saluting as they looked down at her. The white mech with the overly straight back was likely piloted by Sousuke. Although it was only a mechanical puppet, somehow it resembled him.

The second M9 from the rear waved its right hand at Kaname after it brought two fingers up to its temple. A humanoid weapon that flirted—that was probably Kurz. The other M9 that poked the flank might have been Mao.







"This might be a bit grandiose," Tessa said to Kaname, grinning, as Kaname stood rigidly with her mouth agape. "When they heard you were coming, they all said they wanted to show their respect."

"Uh . . . uh. I-I'm . . . uh." Kaname finally understood that she was the lead role here, and she was terribly flustered.

During the hijacking incident four months ago, and the giant AS incident two months ago, Kaname had fulfilled an important role. In both, she had been thrown into unavoidable situations and had done what she had to do, but her participation resulted in a lot of lives saved—Sousuke's and Tessa's included.

This reception was the de Danaan's ultimate show of respect, and it was to celebrate the courage shown by no other than a civilian girl.

"Um . . . I-I'm honored. But I . . . never did anything that amazing," Kaname uttered, red to her ears.

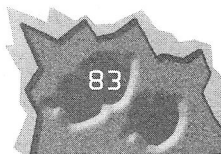
When Tessa explained Kaname's bashfulness to all present, the soldiers suddenly laughed, clapped, and cheered.

"Heyyy, check it out—she's shy!"

"That's so cute! No, I mean seriously!"

"Hey, c'mon guys, that's rude!"

"See, see? Isn't it just like I said?"





"Kanaaammme! Why don't you come be my boy's wife?"

"Damn that Sagara. I'll shoot him in the back."

Order suddenly lost, the crew started bantering. It felt weird that people she just met were making such a fuss over her.

"Would you quiet *down*, people?" Veins bulged in the head of the man who was giving orders as he told off the crew.

Tessa looked out over the crowd with a troubled smile and said, "Once the veneer is off, this is how they are. But they all are thankful to you. Please understand."

"B-but. I really haven't done anything. It's not like I saved the people here." Kaname was completely bewildered. It was true that she had not personally saved this submarine. She had only helped from the sidelines in battles some here had fought. An exaggerated welcome like this somehow seemed illogical.

"That is not true, Miss Chidori," the orders man said, turning to face her. "Whatever results came about are of no great consequence. What you were able to do when you faced those situations is, however. The difficulty of those deeds is. If we understand anything, we understand that."

"Okay," Kaname replied hesitantly.

"The things you did were not things even a seasoned soldier could do easily. I would hope you would take pride in this," the



commander explained in a voice so unofficial-sounding that Kaname wasn't sure how to take it.

"What Commander Mardukas says is correct, Kaname," assured Tessa. "Anyway, the ceremony is now over. We plan to have a little party here next, and I would like you to join us."

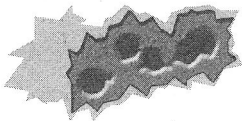
"Party? Hey, that's really more than you need to do for a welcome."

Besides, isn't this a military submarine? Is it all right to kick back and have a party? worried Kaname, the military amateur.

"It's fine. At best, it still will take a full day to reach our destination," explained Tessa, "and the party already had been planned for a different reason, anyway."

"Ah. What other reason?"

"Well, you see, today is . . ." Tessa happily gazed up at the hangar ceiling. "Today is *this* baby's first birthday."



August 26, 13:35 (Greenwich Mean Time)

Tuatha de Danaan Main Hangar



Today, it had been exactly one year since the Tuatha de Danaan first was put out to sea. Originally, there was to be a grand celebration at the Merida Island base, but because a sudden operation had come up, it was decided to have a small party on the submarine.

A party site had been slapped together in a corner of the hangar. A tablecloth was spread on top of empty ammo cases, and one dish after another was brought out from the galley. An M9 decorated with ribbons, sheets, and the like was on one knee, and from its hands hung a large banner that read, "Happy Birthday, Dear Tuatha de Danaan."

The menu consisted of the same things as always, and drinking alcohol was strictly forbidden. It was a far happier atmosphere than the wearisome mess hall, though.

The party began in a natural way: Off-duty crew came and went, enjoying food and conversation as they pleased. With spare time on their hands, land combat personnel were relatively numerous.

After Tessa's short but impressive speech ended, Sergeant Kurz Weber, who was in charge of the party, presided over a BINGO game. Kurz was part of the land combat elite SRT. He was a young man with blond hair, blue eyes, and handsome features, but he didn't have a flair for party planning.



Holding a felt-tip pen in place of a microphone, Kurz announced to everyone: "And that brings us to our three prizes. First, third place: the tip of the radar mast that broke when the Tuatha de Danaan first went to sea—our first accident, which should be commemorated. Included are the signatures of the responsible party and the captain. It's quite an enviable souvenir. Feel free to hang it on your wall."

The crowd, who couldn't care less about such junk, booed.

Kurz feigned complete indifference at their heckling and continued: "Neeext, there's a pretty nice room open along the CO quarters at the Merida Island base. Second prize is the right to live in that room! They say even a private could win it."

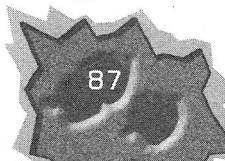
The NCOs and privates cheered, saying things like, "That's pretty nice!" to their colleagues standing beside them. But the officers living in that area were not amused.

The lieutenant junior grade in charge of engineering raised his hand. "Sergeant, I live next to that open room. What happens if I win it?"

"Nothing, sir. We'll just swallow our tears and move on."

The lieutenant stood there stunned.

"And the third one: glorious first place! This is a fantastic prize. It's not something you'd normally be able to get. I'll be straight with you: *I* want it. And that first-place prize is . . ." Kurz' eyes dropped





toward the memo in his hand as he said in an exaggerated tone, "Check it out—it's a hottt kiss with Captain Teletha Testarossa!"

Upon hearing Kurz' declaration, nearly every male soldier present went into an explosive uproar. Some tossed their arms up, some breathed heavily, and some were so excited that they somersaulted.

Tessa stood in shock momentarily, before finally coming to, somewhat startled. "M-Mr. Weber? I hadn't . . . this is the first I've heard . . ."

"Huh? But you said, 'If there's anything I can do to help, just ask,'" he replied.

"W-well . . . I definitely did say that."

"If you don't want to, you could always offer your favorite pair of underwear."

"That would be worse!"

"Then a kiss it is," Kurz contended before moving on with the BINGO game. He turned the basket and called out the number of the ball that dropped. The participants grumbled as they made holes in the cards that had been distributed previously. Whoever received five holes in a row first would win.

Meanwhile, Tessa shrugged her shoulders in a corner of the platform, utterly embarrassed.



After reading out five numbers, Kurz announced, "Is anyone almost there? I figured someone would be by now."

One participant with a sullen face raised his hand. It was Sousuke. "Eh . . ."

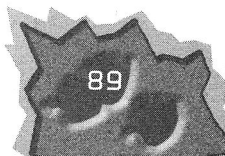
Startled, Tessa unconsciously put her hand to her quickly beating heart. Kaname backed away from Sousuke, looking dismayed. The men participating clicked their tongues in obvious impatience.

Among them, Sousuke alone appeared calm, although a bit dubious, in response to the reactions around him. He seemed to be the only one there who didn't have a good understanding of what first prize meant. "Is something the matter?"

"Lucky bastard," Kurz moaned before continuing the game.

Tessa's mind became more and more unsettled. *What if Sousuke wins? That would be a godsend. I could rush to him with open arms. In my position—without hesitation! But even so—a kiss in front of the eyes of a hundred—some of my men? That would be so embarrassing. It'd cause problems. What should I do?*

"Almost there!" shouted one of the land combat officers. He was SRT member Captain Gail McAllen, Lieutenant Commander Kalinin's adjutant, call sign Urzu One. A short man with a mustache, he was in his mid-thirties.





"Me too. One more to go," yelled Ensign Eva Santos of the transport helicopter team as she raised her hand. Despite being a woman, she appeared strangely elated.

Oh, Mr. Sagara, please hurry and win. I'm begging you. I'm waiting for you. Her own will wasn't going to amount to anything, but Tessa couldn't prevent herself from thinking it. Sousuke didn't seem to notice these feelings of hers at all, evident as he peered down at his BINGO card with a quizzical expression.

"Now things *really* have gotten good! Will it be Sagara, McAllen, or Santos? Continuing on!"

The basket turned, and a ball ejected. Everyone held his or her breath, and in front of a suspenseful Tessa, Kurz read out the number: "B . . . twenty-nine."

"So sorry, mates. BINGO!" McAllen declared with great satisfaction.

A lot of groans and sighs were audible. Some crew members were on their knees cradling their heads, and others threw their cards to the floor.

"Well then! Our first-prize winner is Captain McAllen. To everyone who lost, my condolences. Tessa?"

Hanging her head in disappointment, Tessa feebly shifted her focus to Kurz. "Yes?"



"There you have it. If you would, please!" said Kurz, as everyone began to compose themselves.

Grinning, McAllen climbed up on the platform. He was typically uptight and nagging the land combat members, but now he came off as extremely slack.

"Captain, give him a good one. Do it for us!"

"Please don't, colonel! I'm sure Captain McAllen has some disease!"

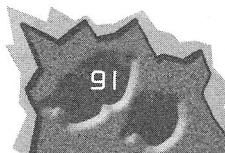
"Just do it already! It's not a big deal."

It was now unavoidable. If she said she didn't want to now, Captain McAllen surely would be hurt, and the onlookers would no doubt be disappointed.

Fine, she thought. I have to retain my official position. Now that I think about it, the old sailors often would kiss one another as a form of greeting. This isn't something to brood over so seriously, is it?

Tessa glanced once in Sousuke's direction. Scowling, he seemed as though he still couldn't digest the situation. Kaname wore an expression that was troubled beyond description. Tessa let the tension drain from her shoulders with a short breath, and said to McAllen, "All right, captain. Are you ready?"

"Ah, aye. Of course, ma'am, this is an honor." The full-grown



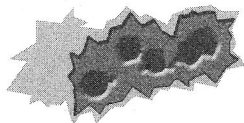


man smiled like a child.

She closed her eyes tightly and planted a kiss on his cheek. Suddenly, jeering whistles, applause, and shouts resounded.

"You know, this is the best day of my life. I sure am lucky," professed McAllen.

Finally realizing what first prize was, Sousuke looked bewildered as he stood at the rear of the crowd.



Once BINGO ended, some of the crew brought out musical instruments. Joining the soldiers of the maintenance and torpedo crews, Master Sergeant Melissa Mao of the SRT played keyboard.

Once the party got going, Kaname was pushed from behind and urged to sing by those around her. She seemed passive at first, but when Kyu Sakamoto's "Sukiyaki" came up, she got into it, went into enthusiastic karaoke mode, and sang several more songs to satisfy the hopes of the audience. She even hauled Tessa up on stage and soulfully sang James Brown's famous song "Sex Machine."

"Get up!"

"G-get up . . ."



"Get on up!"

"G-get on . . . up?"

"That's too quiet! You couldn't even order *pizza* like that, much less give *orders*! Right, everyone?" yelled Kaname.

There was a resounding "Yeah!"

"Should I take 'em to the Brooklyn Bridge?"

"Yeah!"

As Kaname continued at rapid fire, the audience members answered while stomping their feet; then, Kaname repeated her parts, and Tessa shouted after her in the same groove.

When the song ended, the communications officer approached Tessa and whispered something in her ear. Until that point, she had been smiling as though she were enjoying the hoopla with all her heart, but her joy suddenly was replaced by a hardened expression. It soon returned to a gentle smile, though, and she excused herself from Kaname and those around her, leaving. Kaname and the others watched her exit the party with blank stares—but before long, they recaptured their excitement and resumed partying.

Away from the crowded ring of people, Sousuke was by himself, chewing on a fruit-flavored Calorie Mate. He sat on a small container



in a corner of the hangar, gazing absentmindedly at Kaname and the others. *This side of her is one of her talents*, he thought.

It had only been a matter of hours since she'd boarded the ship, and yet Kaname had thoroughly opened up to the crew. In fact, she already had achieved great popularity. Her unaffected demeanor and open attitude, and her amazing lack of wariness, must have softened their moods. It was not limited to this crew, either. She also was able to get along with people whom she encountered at school and elsewhere.

Sousuke wondered *whether those were special skills far more valuable than firing a gun or piloting an AS*. When he looked at Kaname or at Tessa, Sousuke always felt as if he were a terribly incomplete being. As his thoughts continued to stir, the music changed to light jazz.

Kaname sang on the stage, taking light steps. Gazing downward with a smile, she gracefully twisted her upper half, and her black hair lightly fluttered through the air.

Suddenly, a slight sigh escaped Sousuke's lips. For some reason, he had the feeling that Kaname was in the farthest place away from him in the world.

"I knew she'd be hot up there."

This made Sousuke realize for the first time that Kurz was nearby. He had a non-alcoholic beer can in his hand.



"Her style's outstanding, too, and she has good taste," declared Kurz. "The men around her aren't about to leave her alone."

"So what. I'm not interested," insisted Sousuke bluntly.

"She can sing, too—and she has rhythm. I'll bet she's really popular at school," said Kurz.

"She does have leadership ability, that's true."

Kurz looked askance at Sousuke, a malicious smile creeping over his face. "You see this side of her, and it doesn't make you think of anything?"

"Not especially."

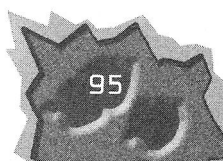
"Then, I wonder what that sigh was all about?" Apparently, Kurz had been observing Sousuke closely.

Sousuke's face grew sullen as he said, "I was . . . just anxious about all the noise. This submarine is in the middle of an operation. The level of chatting is one thing, but a musical performance—"

"Oh man, would you stop bein' a drag? Tessa said it was okay. As her underling, you don't have the right to pick apart every little detail."

Sousuke didn't refute him. "Well, that's true."

Noise was a powerful enemy of the de Danaan—but at the moment, there were no surface ships or submarines within nineteen





miles of her. Making noise in this manner while cruising in their area of operation was practically suicide, but now was different. Even if a gun were fired inside the craft, only migratory fish in the area would hear it.

Of course, even at a relaxed moment like this, there were people fearful about the possibility of death at their destination, but pondering over that wouldn't change the fact that they had to wait until the submarine arrived. Allotting time for recreation like this wasn't such a bad idea.

"Everyone gets uneasy, no matter how much experience they've had, y'know?" said Kurz.

Sousuke didn't respond.

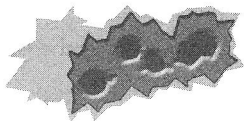
As of the following day, a strict noise policy would be imposed throughout the submarine. A rigid pre-operation atmosphere would set in, and an oppressive tension would likely tighten the crews' hearts little by little. Ultimately, combat would begin. But Kaname and the crew enjoyed their party as though such dark clouds weren't on the horizon.

"Huh? One more song? C'mon . . . ah, fine—you win. That one by Stevie Wonder we talked about before. You ready, Miss Mao?"

"Okay, okay. Bring it on."



"Good, here we go!" Kaname snapped her fingers to the beat of the intro.



August 26, 15:17 (Greenwich Mean Time)
Tuatha de Danaan, Central Command Center

Quite the opposite of the party scene in the hangar, the command center was absolutely tranquil. The only ambience was provided by the blue glow of the screen at the front of the command center and the status board, which was illuminated green. Digital readings and figures provided a bit of texture.

When Tessa returned from the party, Mardukas and Kalinin were waiting for her next to the captain's chair. "The situation?" she asked.

"Not good," replied Lieutenant Commander Andrei Kalinin. He was the Russian operational commander of the surface forces, and he was almost never present when the news was good. "U.S. special forces carried out a sneak attack, which resulted in failure. We do not



have details yet. There are too many things that simply do not make sense.”

A section of the blue screen displayed information about the armed group that occupied the chemical weapons dismantling base. As far as could be determined, there were eight French-made Arm Slaves and five Soviet-made antiaircraft vehicles. There were likely more than twenty personnel. The medium-sized disguised transport ship that had brought them there had been left in the water on the south side of the base.

“This certainly *is* strange,” Tessa said as she furrowed her brow. “They’re fully outfitted for some terrorist group, but they don’t seem large enough to repel the special forces. What kind of chemical weapons are stored there?”

“There is no sign that lethal gas was discharged as a result of the combat. Nor does there seem to have been any intentional explosions—although the terrorist bulletin seems to indicate that they are determined to cause one next,” asserted Kalinin.

“A brute force suppression operation—they must be feeling very motivated.”

At the moment, the media had no knowledge of the occupation. The American government did not want knowledge of this base to

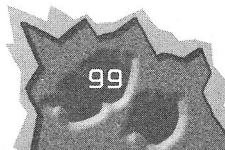


become public, so it was trying to somehow deal with the problem from behind the scenes. According to Mithril's intelligence report, the terrorist group had destroyed all the tourist facilities in the Perio Archipelago and demanded the evacuation of all tourists. They identified themselves as the Green Salvation Army, saying that their actions were to protect the beautiful Perio coral reefs—or so went their declaration.

The Green Salvation Army had not responded to negotiations, such as other terms the Americans had set forth. However, as the Republic of Perio had no other real industry besides tourism, there was no way it could comply with the demand; and the fundamental policy of the United States and Western Europe was not to give in to terrorism for any reason. The terrorists should have been fully aware of that, too.

"I don't like this," Tessa said, squeezing the end of her braid. "Their skill in occupying the base, their way of dealing with the special forces, their methods of obtaining equipment—they all smack of technical skill and professionalism. Their demand is like that of some amateur burglar. This may be some kind of diversion."

"I don't know. However, it doesn't change the danger of the situation," Mardukas interjected.





"My senses tell me that operational headquarters seems set on making us suppress this situation, which means it's unavoidable. Good grief," said Tessa, who was growing increasingly distressed.

It was possible that top American government officials already were in contact with high-ranking Mithril brass. Since the Sunan incident, the number of classified operation commissions for Mithril from heads of various countries had been growing. Once detailed negotiations and adjustments were finished, the go ahead was eventually given.

Suddenly, the sub's main AI sounded: "Captain, intelligence message on channel GI from intelligence HQ. Decompressed as File N98H038IIa, now receiving. Complete. Shall I display it immediately?"

"Yes, please do," ordered Tessa.

"Aye, ma'am."

New information showed up on Tessa's personal screen. The electronic file sent from the intelligence division was additional information regarding the incident at the chemical weapons plant. The special forces had been severely defeated, and the combat situation after they fled was described as pending. Tessa and the others silently read over the document and attached figures.





The realities recorded therein made the situation even worse: The U.S. Arm Slaves had been wiped out by a single enemy AS. Its model type was unknown, and so was its maker. However, its image had at least been captured on the video camera of a soldier who returned alive.

Tessa tried calling up the image. Once displayed, the still image revealed a blurry red AS. Its arms were spread in ridicule as it sprinted along the outskirts of the base. It had a massive upper half, a diamond-shaped head, long limbs, and abnormally spontaneous and powerful movement.

"This is like that other one!" exclaimed Tessa. It looked almost the same as the mech that Sagara and Weber battled in Sunan—an unidentified silver AS piloted by the fiendish terrorist Gauron. Tessa and the others recognized it from the images on the mission recorder of the ARX-7 Arbalest, which had fought with it.

"I wonder if it's equipped with a Lambda Driver," Tessa said.

"It's likely that it is."

"Which is why the U.S. forces lost. I like this less and less." Tessa pressed the tip of her braid against her lips. She felt apprehensive. There was a sticky discomfort in her mouth that seemed to indicate something extremely bad was going to happen. It felt as though something in her head was shouting, "You must not go near those waters!"



If she could have, Tessa would've turned the ship around one hundred eighty degrees and returned to Merida Island, but she pulled herself together and said, "Mr. Kalinin, how is the Arbalest?"

"It can be used at any time, although initialization proved impossible in the end."

"Sergeant Sagara still has not received a concrete explanation?"

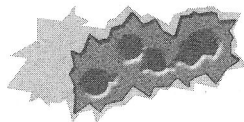
"That was the plan."

"Fine. Now I'm changing it. Please advise Ensign Lemming to give the sergeant an explanation about the Arbalest and the Lambda Driver."

"How much can he be told?"

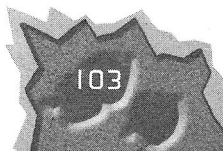
"Everything we currently understand. Although, I suppose that's not so much."

"Aye-aye, ma'am."



August 26, 17:02 (Greenwich Mean Time)

Tuatha de Danaan, Main Hangar





After the party broke up, Melissa Mao spoke to Kaname while she helped with cleanup.

"Sorry about making you do vocals all of a sudden."

"Nah, no problem. It was fun," Mao answered with a smile as she quickly folded the sheets.

"Everyone really got into it. I was sure mostly everyone in Mithril was like Sousuke."

"Ha ha. That kid's a little . . . special."

Melissa Mao was Sousuke's colleague, and she had met Kaname several times before. But this was the first time they'd actually had a chance to talk in a leisurely way.

Kaname had heard Mao was Asian-American, but at a glance, she didn't look that different from Japanese. Mao could speak Japanese fluently, too, although with a bit more of an accent than Kurz. She had very short black hair, and her big, slanted eyes were mesmerizing.

What a cool lady she is, Kaname always thought upon meeting her.
And somehow sexy . . .

"So, what about Tessa?" Mao suddenly asked as she and Kaname worked.

"What about . . . ? Well, she's a cute girl."



"Yeah. Things might be complicated with Sousuke, but be nice to her."

"Uh . . ." Kaname was taken aback.

"She told you, didn't she? That she loves Sousuke?" Mao continued as if just chatting.

"W-well . . . she did say that. But he and I aren't really—"

"Aren't really anything?" Mao grinned.

In a terribly inarticulate voice, Kaname muttered, "Uh . . . uh-uh."

"That's just as well then. Ohhh, by the way, I'm the only one who knows about that. Relax. She and I are friends in private," Mao said as she threw some food into an acrylic bag.

Kaname stood and watched. "But is it true?"

"Is what true?"

"That . . . that Tessa and Sousuke . . . I watched them during the party, but I didn't get that kind of feeling."

Mao smiled, but with a slightly sad expression, as though she were feeling pity for someone. "Yeah. How can I say it? When she's on a voyage, she can never be the 'maiden in love.'"

"Why not?"

"If I had to guess, it's because the de Danaan is a craft that engages in killing. Nevertheless, Tessa is its commander. Depending



on the situation, she might have to order a subordinate to die in order to protect the submarine and her crew.”

Kaname fell silent.

“So she keeps an appropriate distance from her crew—at least, so far as other crewmen can see.”

“So that’s why . . .” When Kaname thought about it, it made perfect sense. Submarines, corporations, school clubs—they all were the same. Leaders had to be official. If they displayed in front of the team that they personally favored any one individual, the others would lose their motivation. Their urge to follow such a leader would wither.

“That really sounds difficult,” Kaname said.

“Sure does. It’s difficult and lonely,” Mao agreed.

Having come to these conclusions, Kaname felt as though she finally understood how amazing Tessa was. Being shown such a huge submarine, even after having been given such an exaggerated welcome, Kaname still had not been able to really feel it.

But why is that? she wondered. Why did a girl the same age as her have such a heavy responsibility? She managed adults like Mao and even Kalinin, and even did battle. Wasn’t that really harsh labor?

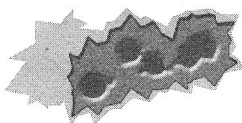


As Kaname was about to ask Mao that question, Tessa entered the hangar. She looked in the direction of the pair and quickly walked over.

"Kaname."

"Wh-what?"

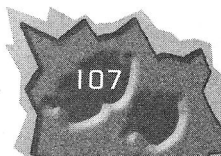
"We need to talk. Please come with me."



Led by Tessa, Kaname headed for the captain's quarters.

The Tuatha de Danaan was a special submarine that could admit helicopters and AS mechs. The front half of the craft was made up of combat-related facilities, such as the hangar, weapons powder magazines, and torpedo tube chambers, as well as other facilities that helped it function like a ship, including the command center and residence block, galley and mess hall, and the reactor, which all were isolated in the back, away from the center of the ship.

"In terms of structure, it resembles a Soviet Typhoon-class nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine," Tessa explained while walking. "Actually, this ship is originally of Russian birth. The hull was constructed at the Severodvinsk shipyards, but due to a domestic





conflict, it was to be discarded, still unfinished, in the Arctic Ocean. That was when we secretly appropriated it.”

“In other words, you swiped an unfinished piece of scrap?” asked Kaname.

“Well, it does come down to that, yes.” Tessa continued with a dissatisfied-looking face. “Using that hull as a base, I redid the plans with the help of one other person. We packed it with super technology that no country or enterprise possesses, took years repairing and upgrading, and at long last, got it to this point.”

“Huh.” Kaname responded half-heartedly, unable to appreciate Tessa and her colleague’s phenomenal feat.

“The ship’s control system is also automated at a high level. If needed, one person could control the whole ship.”

“One person?” Even Kaname was surprised by this.

“Yes. However, there are various weaknesses associated with using full-automatic mode. For instance, this submarine’s greatest strong point—the SCP, or superconductive propulsion—would be rendered inoperable. In the end, without a skilled crew looking after her, a ship this complex would not fully function.”

Before long, they arrived at the captain’s quarters. Tessa unlocked the door and went inside. This was the room that Tessa lived in, but



at some point, Kaname's things, which were supposedly left in the infirmary, had been brought here.

"Say what?"

"Yes, Kaname, you will be lodging here. Please make yourself as comfortable as you wish."

The captain's quarters were not very roomy, and not unlike a frugal business hotel room. Simply opening the stowaway bed probably would make the quarters extremely cramped. Apart from the small bathroom at the back, absolutely no luxury fixtures were apparent. The only thing that bothered Kaname a little was the sturdy safe embedded in the wall. On the desk were a potted *pothos*, a colorful candle, and a rattan basket. And next to the basket, an acrylic frame was turned over.

Kaname casually reached for the frame when—

"Oh, that's . . ." Tessa sprung forward and held down the frame with both hands. "Y-you shouldn't see this. It's . . . confidential. This week's command codes and identification codes . . . memos of that nature are inserted in it," she explained, turning red.

Kaname could tell there was no way such memos were inside the stand. *It's probably somebody's picture. Probably his.* Kaname remembered her earlier conversation with Mao, and she entered into a complex mental



state. She felt pleasant, pitiful, anxious, and relieved all at the same time, which caused her chest to tighten a little.

Kaname dared to feign indifference, however. "If it's that important, shouldn't you put it in a more proper place?"

"Y-yes, I should. And I will." Tessa put the frame in the safe and coughed softly. "Now, if you would, please have a seat. Would you like tea?"

"Sure. I'll have some," Kaname answered as she took a seat on the lone couch in the room.

Tessa turned her back on Kaname as she took a tea set from the cabinet.

Kaname was a little sleepy. The clock on the wall said it was still evening—seventeen hours twenty-nine—but that was just on this ship, Greenwich Mean Time. In Japan, it was already one thirty in the morning.

"You're probably tired," Tessa said, "but please stay awake a little longer. Things will get busy tomorrow, so I want to talk to you now."

Kaname yawned lightly and said, "Sure. So, what'd you want to talk about?"

"About *us*."



"Mithril?"

"No. About you and me—and several other people. I don't know the exact number, though."

Not completely understanding, Kaname cocked her head. "What do you mean?"

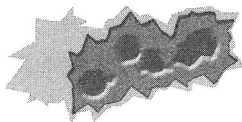
"The Whispered," Tessa replied in a voice as soft and sweet as a sigh.

Kaname spontaneously stiffened.

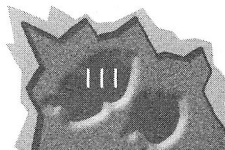
"Have you already heard that word?"

"Yeah."

Amid the silent tension, Kaname realized her heartbeat had sped up.



Whispered. It was about that, Kaname thought. The word had been stuck in a corner of her mind for some time. It made her terribly uneasy, so she endeavored not to think about it. The secret hidden within herself—the secret for which she'd faced death multiple times. She'd been thinking that this reunion with Tessa was to confront that secret, in spite of the fact that she didn't understand the basis for it.





It was for this reason that Kaname hadn't pestered Sousuke to let her see Tessa again. Kaname had wanted to see her, but at the same time, she was extremely reluctant to. By approaching the secret, she might become distant from her home, school, and the people who lived in her world. She could not get that thought out of her head, no matter what. It seemed, though, that the time had come for even that type of passive evasion to end.

"I think you already realized that, though," said Tessa. "I am one of them, too—a Whispered like yourself. I know things I shouldn't know, and in the right situation, I can draw them out. In the entire world, there are perhaps only several of us—potentially, several dozen. That is all who exist."

The sound of ceramic colliding with metal interjected Tessa's admission. It felt as if time were passing slowly. Kaname thought she would forget that she was two thousand one hundred fifty-three feet beneath the ocean's surface.

"Whispereds are often said to be 'treasuries of Black Technology.' If conditions are right, they can furnish scientific theories and technology far beyond the current standard."

"I can too?" inquired Kaname.



"Yes. However, when regular children are born as Whispereds, they often grow up with no knowledge whatsoever of their power. As they grow to adulthood, though, their minds mature, and their knowledge and vocabulary increase. They gradually come to hear the 'whispering voice.'"

Kaname listened intently.

"When this begins, the Whispered's intelligence rapidly begins to climb. Problems they previously couldn't understand become easy, and they give rise to original ideas. They steadily grow closer to the level of a genius."

"I-I will?"

"Does any of this sound familiar?"

"Um, I don't know. But . . ." Kaname remembered her final exam scores for first semester. English and social studies were so-so good. Japanese wasn't so hot. Those were the same as always. But science and math had been irregular. When she had taken the math and science exam, Kaname had thought, *Why'd they put such easy questions on here? Everyone's gonna get a hundred percent.*

That hadn't happened, though. Kaname's school grade's composite average for math and science was a score of fifty-two versus Kaname's ninety-five, despite the tendency for physics and calculus to



be one of her biggest weaknesses. Kyouko and the others—Sousuke included—were struck with admiration.

What if that wasn't a fluke? thought Kaname.

"That sounds creepy," she said to Tessa, fighting the sensation that she was no longer herself. No matter how easily she achieved victory in her weak subjects, there was no way she was happy about it.

"I suppose it is, but it's the truth," Tessa said, her voice lacking inflection.

Maybe this is how doctors talk when they say, "You have cancer" to a patient, thought Kaname.

"In addition to this fundamental knowledge, Whispereds sometimes know more advanced things—things they shouldn't be aware of—through the 'whispering.'"

Whispering . . . she means that voice. Pondering the weight of her power, she exclaimed, "All of a sudden?"

"Yes. As far as I know, you have exhibited that power twice. The first time was in the North Korean mountains. The second time was during combat with the Behemoth. You knew things that you shouldn't have been able to know. But then, the second time, I lent you a hand."



"Lent me a hand?"

"Don't you remember?"

"Uh, sort of. But . . . I'm not really sure about what happened then. . . ." *That* time. She'd heard voices dimly within her consciousness. One was extremely eerie, but the other was probably Tessa's.

"What happened then is called 'resonance.'"

"Resonance?"

"Yes. When a few conditions are met, Whispereds will undergo resonance. They can share their thoughts through a deep, invisible part of their minds—a 'sphere.' When you and I feel strongly that we need each other, that happens as a result."

"In other words, it's like telepathy?" Kaname didn't feel like being made a fool of. She'd already had too many weird experiences to dismiss this as unbelievable.

"Telepathy . . . I don't know. It's a tricky definition," Tessa answered as she brought the tea tray over. She placed teacups on the small table in front of Kaname and poured red tea from the plunger-style pot.

A pleasant aroma tickled Kaname's nose.

"Resonance is a little different than speaking on the telephone or over a radio. Maybe the closest connection is a computer LAN," explained Tessa.



"Like the Internet?" proposed Kaname.

"But on a smaller scale. In any case, there are not many of us. However, resonance is a very dangerous act. We must avoid that situation as much as possible."

"Why? I mean, if we really *do* have a power that handy—"

"'Handy' things are always doubled-edged swords, Kaname," Tessa said admonishingly. "I say this repeatedly, but the resonance of Whispereds is the sharing of thoughts, not conversation or communication. It's a blending of minds, although it may be temporary. One wrong step, and you will no longer know who you are. For instance, like this." Tessa picked up a small milk bottle and poured it into the tea, causing a red-and-white swirl to form. As it spun around, the tea and milk mixed, and before long, it became an opaque agate color.

"If this happens, it's all over: You cannot separate the tea from the milk," Tessa explained as she sipped her milk tea. "Milk complements the taste of tea, so it's all well and good. But a person's mind must not do that. Your identity goes to pieces, and you will be unable to go on living."

"I kind of get it, and . . . don't get it," admitted Kaname.

"I'm sorry for all the abstract expressions, but when it comes down to it, I don't understand it well either. Regardless, I essentially have become the only Whispered in Mithril."



Hearing this, Kaname blinked in surprise. "There are other people like us?"

When Kaname inquired about the other Whispereds, Tessa appeared distressed, as if there were still something she couldn't sort out, or like she was trying to suppress a surge of an intense emotion. "Yes, one individual we took into our care several months ago is in rehabilitation. Aside from her, there was one other Whispered who was able to handle knowledge the way I do."

Kaname was a little concerned about the word "was," but without inquiring further, she asked, "What kind of person?"

"His name was Bani Morauta. He was taciturn, but kind—and extraordinarily excellent. He made that work of art—the Arbalest."

"Arbalest?"

"Mr. Sagara's white AS."

"Ahh." Kaname learned for the first time that Sousuke's mech had a name.

"The Arbalest is based on the M9 prototype, and it has a Lambda Driver installed. As an AS, it simply was an investigation into the importation of Black Technology, with no thought given to productivity. Its construction would be impossible now, as Bani is no longer with us."



"You couldn't make it, Tessa?"

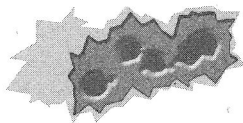
"No. Whispereds are not all knowing. I know only a limited amount regarding the theory and technology of the Lambda Driver. It's possible for me to intentionally summon the whisper and attempt to learn more, but I can't bring myself to try it."

"Why not?"

"Because it's far more dangerous than resonance. Each time we dive into the mysteries of the mind and try to gain forbidden knowledge, the whisper tries to possess us. If you surrender to it once, you will never be normal again. I actually know people it's happened to. He—Bani—was one of them."

"You mean, he was possessed?"

"Yes. He went insane and committed suicide."



The captain's quarters were still and silent. The Tuatha de Danaan really was a quiet submarine. There was no engine or wave noise, nor did the hull creak from water pressure. It was so quiet that it was maddening.



"Now then, Kaname," Tessa set down her partially drunk tea, "the reason I'm telling you all about Whispereds is because you're no exception. Even if it doesn't happen soon, please be aware that you're in danger. There is the whisper to consider, but that's not all. There are people out there who want people like you and me by any means necessary."

"You mean, like that Gauron guy?"

"Yes. He appears to be dead, but we believe there was some organization behind him. Whoever offered the Behemoth to Takuma and the others is probably that same organization. And they have the power to build Arm Slaves with Lambda Drivers. Basically, it means they already have one or more Whispereds in their possession."

Kaname's expression bordered on frightened.

"They want you. Me too, of course, if they knew about me. Because of that, they'll stoop to any level of despicableness."

Kaname found herself unable to relax. She messed with the hem of her dress with her fingertip. She was being targeted. She had heard that before, but the threat had never been conveyed so directly. The world she lived in—the bustling town and school—were too peaceful for her to understand such danger from experience. "But, I mean, how could . . . ?"



"I understand that it makes you uneasy. But you're not fighting alone and unaided. We don't feel it's a good thing for you to fall into the so-called enemy's hands. Mithril's higher ups also feel this way, and a guard from the intelligence division has been assigned to you."

"That would be Sousuke," Kaname declared.

Tessa shook her head a little. "No, Mr. Sagara and I are not part of the intelligence division, but rather part of the tactical division. You probably haven't noticed, but it means that there is someone else besides Mr. Sagara who is guarding you."

The thought struck Kaname like lightning. "S-someone else? Who?"

"I don't know either—and not knowing is probably best," concluded Tessa. "That agent's forte is being completely invisible to both enemies and allies. If you were conscious of that person, he—or perhaps *she*—would lose that advantage."

"Well, that's . . . whoa . . ." For some reason, Kaname's student council president's face came to mind. If it happened to be that particular calm, level, able student, she might not be very surprised. *No, that could never be the case. Is it someone else then?*

"It was Mr. Kalinin who suggested that Mr. Sagara be attached to you after the Sunan incident. You're probably well aware of this, but Mr. Sagara



stands out in a peaceful society. If an enemy were to make a serious attempt to kidnap you, he probably first would try to remove Mr. Sagara.”

Kaname tried to guess what that was supposed to mean. “Wha—then, Sousuke’s a . . . decoy?”

“That’s what it comes down to,” Tessa said in a somewhat unexpected, nonchalant tone.

Kaname suddenly felt her face grow hot. “No! That’s terrible. Sousuke’s trying as hard as he can. I mean, he’s kind of a nuisance, but he’s always desperately trying to protect me! How could you use him to fish for bad guys?”

“I understand that!” Tessa exclaimed, intensifying her tone. Not trying to conceal her irritation, she glared at Kaname.

Kaname was stunned by Tessa’s sudden change of demeanor and fell quiet.

Tessa soon regained her composure. Looking down, she said, “I’m sorry, but please think about it—for whose sake that would have to happen.”

“Uh . . .” Caught with her guard down, Kaname was at a loss for words.

“Mr. Sagara already knows there’s another guard, and it’s likely he knows he’s a decoy, which puts him in a terribly dangerous position. But still, he undertakes the duty. All of this being—”



For Kaname's sake: That was what Tessa couldn't say. Tessa stopped talking.

Sousuke knew. Kaname was more surprised at that than at the existence of the "guard in the shadows" himself. After all, Sousuke had never even breathed a syllable about it. He always boasted, saying he would protect her, when in reality, he was in the most danger. He had never told her an important thing like that.

Sousuke . . . Kaname's chest grew hot, and at the same time, a relentless sense of shame weighed her down. The extent of her own foolishness made her miserable, and a self-aborrence comparable to Tessa's pain made her want to disappear. "T-Tessa . . ."

Tessa stared back blankly.

"Sorry. I-I didn't understand. I mean, I *really* . . ." Kaname didn't know what to say.

As Kaname faltered, Tessa's expression suddenly relaxed. "It's all right," she said. "It's not you at fault, but the enemies who are targeting you."

"You aren't mad?"

"No, don't worry. I was just a little jealous of you and Mr. Sagara, and it irritated me," Tessa confessed as she expelled a big



sigh. Then, as if her mood had suddenly shifted, she shook her head a bit and proclaimed, "This doesn't mean I've raised a white flag, though."

"What?"

"Of course, I'm holding back during this voyage, but during times of peace, I see him at the base quite often."

"I-is that so?"

"Yes. Not too long ago, we slipped away from the base and were alone on a sandy beach. . . ."

"S-sandy beach?"

"Mmhmm. The rest is a secret."

"Oh, c'mon!" Kaname moved in closer.

Tessa shrugged. "This makes us even, Kaname. I love Mr. Sagara, but you haven't admitted that to yourself. So, there is bound to be a point of difference."

"Now look—like I said, I'm not . . ." Kaname had said only that much when it occurred to her how funny it was that she was getting so irritated. After peering into the eyes of her viperish opponent for precisely one second, the tension suddenly drained from her shoulders, and she said, "Oh, whatever. Ha ha!"

"Yes. Hmm."



They laughed together, carefree, for a while. Up until a mere few minutes earlier, the mood had been gloomy, as if the end of the world had come—but now, that was completely forgotten.

To think that the topic of that war nut Sousuke would be such a saving grace . . . Kaname was secretly thankful for him, but there definitely was a need to put that “alone on a sandy beach” bit deep inside the ammo depot in her head.

“This was mostly what I wanted to talk about, except for one last thing,” Tessa said after laughing for a while. “What I just told you—especially concerning the Whispereds—is known by only a few people even within Mithril. Neither Mr. Sagara, Mr. Weber, nor Melissa know about it.”

“So, it’s top secret—that kind of thing?”

“Correct. Though, actually, it needs to be treated with even higher confidentiality. We call that a ‘Black Fact.’” Tessa’s tone wasn’t especially grave or enigmatic, but the lack of a threatening ring to it somehow made her delivery all the more intense. “I want you to promise me something: not to disclose this conversation to anyone. Not to Mr. Sagara, your school friends, or to your family. Your father, in particular, probably doesn’t think highly of an organization like Mithril.”



"That may be true." *So, she does know*, thought Kaname.

Kaname's father was a U.N. staff member, and served as High Commissioner for the Environment. It was a newly established position, and he was in charge of the mediation and regulation of environmental issues. It lacked the authority and budget of other U.N. organizational positions—for example, the High Commissioner for Refugees—but it was not something one could ignore.

"Taking consideration of your father's clout, Mithril's higher ups have prohibited me from explaining the situation to you. That order is in effect even now."

"Eh. Then . . ."

"Right. What I've done is a grave offense. I worried over it for a very long time, but I decided to tell you. I can't leave you in danger for the sake of my superiors' political decision."

The risk Tessa had taken probably far exceeded what Kaname imagined. She didn't know whether Mithril had such sentences as death by firing squad, but it certainly was enough of a violation for Tessa to lose her job.

"But why?" Kaname asked with upturned eyes.

Tessa trembled slightly and seemed to be hesitating—that, or she was embarrassed. "Well, you needn't think deeply about it. There



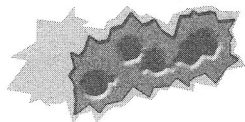
was no big reason. Anyway, will you promise me that you won't discuss it?"

Looking directly into Tessa's eyes, Kaname nodded without hesitation. "Yeah. And I won't tell anyone—I promise."

"As friends?" asked Tessa.

"Okay, as friends."

The two shook hands with complete sincerity.



The next morning, Sousuke and Kurz accompanied Kaname on a tour around the ship. They went around to the mess hall, ready room, torpedo tube chambers, and command center, and heard fun stories here and there from crew on duty.

The sonar room was especially interesting. The sonarmen let Kaname listen to the prized tape of ocean sounds the submarine had recorded. The melancholy calls of whales, the clicking calls of dolphins, and undersea volcano activity. The sea was a far busier place than she had imagined.

Kaname also observed the weapons in the hangar. She was shown the pilot's seat of an attack helicopter, and she held the control



stick. She was let inside an AS cockpit and moved the head just to play around.

When she said she also wanted to move the limbs, for some reason, Sousuke got miffed and refused, saying, "No, it's dangerous, *extremely* dangerous."

Kaname didn't say a word to anyone about what Tessa told her. She interacted with them as she always had.

Moving along, she found the inside of the submarine to be much more interesting than a typical resort spot. Every single thing she saw or encountered was new and fresh, and more or less full of surprises. Once noontime passed, however, Kaname noticed that the mood onboard changed a little. The expressions of the crew hardened somewhat. The hangar that had been astir with maintenance work became still as death. The number of people going to and fro in the passages or who had little to do in the residential block decreased remarkably. For some reason, the atmosphere was tense.

When Kaname asked about this, Sousuke explained, "That's because the submarine has gotten near the operational zone."

"Operational zone?"

"Right. Combat will begin soon."



CHAPTER 3

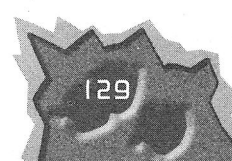
Water Pressure, Heavy Pressure, Suppression

August 27, 18:57 (Local Time)

Perio Archipelago Coastal Waters

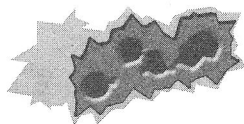
The Tuatha de Danaan had arrived at the ocean area dozens of miles northeast of the Perio Archipelago. The surface waves were calm, and the evening sun shone, making the coral-reefed South Sea sparkle.

Beneath the surface, the giant submarine continued along a path of flame red and dim darkness. In a way, it was a picturesque scene—and yet, it was one charged with sinister metaphor: a black silhouette suggestive of a knife or shark, elegant and smooth curves hiding a faculty for slaughter and destruction. If there were a fish that could take in the magnificence of this craft, it would flee from it without hesitation.





Inside the de Danaan, combat preparations were steadily progressing.



August 27, 14:36 (Greenwich Mean Time)

Tuatha de Danaan, Briefing Room One

“The briefing will now begin!” Captain Gail McAllen announced to the soldiers chatting idly amongst themselves as he entered the room.

There were a total of thirty-two combatants assembled in the briefing room, each wearing a rough field uniform. Once the start time of the operation neared, they each would change into their “going out” clothes—camouflage, flight suits, and AS pilot suits.

Sousuke took his eyes off the book he had been reading, and the other soldiers ended their chatter. Kurz alone, who was sitting behind Sousuke, started whispering something to his colleague next to him, Corporal Jun-gyu Yang.

Captain McAllen aimed a glare at his subordinates from the corner of a large liquid crystal screen. “You there, quit talking.”



"Yes sir."

An Australian, Captain McAllen was Lieutenant Commander Kalinin's adjutant, as well as the head of the SRT; his call sign was Urzu One. Even his face, slack during the BINGO game, now was rigidly tight. "Everyone here? If so, the lieutenant commander will give a general explanation of the operation. Eyes on him!"

Lieutenant Commander Kalinin walked out past Captain McAllen to stand in front of everyone. His eyes scanned the clipboard he carried, and he began talking without any preface. "This you already know, but a U.S. Armed Forces facility has been occupied by an armed group."

His voice lacked affectation or fighting spirit, sounding as if he were deciding who was on cleaning duty next week. "The U.S. Navy special forces already have failed once in a recovery attempt. As this is a special case, we who use equipment more advanced than they use are set for a return match. Your principle duties will be Suppression of Enemy Arm Slaves and securing the safety of the hostages, as well as preventing the destruction of critical infrastructure. Here's where the party will be," he said, turning a switch on the large screen.

When he inserted a disc in a side slot, a three-dimensional map of a small elliptical island was displayed. There was a slanting



elevation change, so that the west shore was a cliff and the east shore was a sandy beach. The U.S. military base stretched across the gentle slope, occupying most of it.

"The Republic of Perio, Berildaobu Island chemical weapons dismantling base. It was established in order to neutralize, incinerate, and dispose of obsolete chemical warheads. For that reason, several hundred tons of nerve gas such as sarin, tabun, and soman are still housed there."

Nearly every face in the room clouded. They knew all too well that the simple phrase "deadly poison" failed to cover such chemical weapons.

"The armed group in question calls themselves the Green Salvation Army. They say their actions are to drive the tourist industry out of the Perio Archipelago and protect the coral reef's natural habitat. They intend to do so by threatening to spread poisonous gas."

"This is preposterous," one of the combatants said.

"So, if they can't protect it, it's euthanasia time?"

"If that's a joke, it ain't very funny."

Among the naysayers, some seemed to find black humor in the situation. Low laughter rumbled in the background. "Why is there



such a dangerous facility in a sightseeing spot like Perio in the first place?"

"It means there was too much uproar about building it on the American mainland," answered McAllen. "Popular opinion, gubernatorial elections, lobbying, and other kinds of things. It's a complicated and mysterious political process. You blokes probably wouldn't enjoy the tale."

"How right you are," quipped Kalinin.

The member who asked about the facility shrugged.

"On the other hand, the Archipelago was until only recently a U.S.-mandated territory. Now that it's independent, it's still under American protection, and it's still dependent on the country economically and militarily. This country had the building of such a facility pushed on it, in other words."

It's the same as anywhere, thought Sousuke as he listened quietly. Poor countries and regions always drew the short stick. Military bases, waste-processing plants, and nuclear power plants—depending on circumstances, there also could be the bonus of an armed conflict thrown in.

Kalinin continued his briefing: "Whatever the case, we have to get this Green Salvation Army to leave this troublesome disposal



site. Let's zoom in on the base." He increased the magnification of the three-dimensional model on screen. Several low buildings, a barracks, and an office were visible. There also was a short runway and a heliport, but no seaport. In the center of this CG model was a conspicuously large half-underground structure, which was the chemical warhead storage and disposal site.

"Chemical warheads still to be dealt with are kept in this underground storehouse. According to our intelligence, the terrorists have rigged a large quantity of explosives here."

"Then, if that's detonated—"

"A ruinous amount of nerve gas would be propelled up several thousand feet by the blast, and then spread across the downwind Archipelago. A lethal dose of these gases is one milligram per adult. The Perio Archipelago probably would become a lifeless zone within a day," Kalinin said plainly.

An oppressive silence swept the room. Every soldier wore an expression that seemed to say, "I want to go back to the Merida Island base."

"Consequently, first there's a need to disarm those bombs. Beyond that, we'll destroy the enemy war capacity, and at the same time, secure the captured American soldiers."



The members grumbled in turn.

"Sounds easy, put that way."

"Man, that's one helluva stunt."

"Like we ever get anything else!"

Captain McAllen shouted at them: "Keep it down! Earn your pay before you complain!"

Everyone reluctantly shut their mouths.

Kalinin continued his explanation as though nothing had happened. "At this point, the enemy has nine AS mechs and five self-propelled Triple As."

An image of the enemy Arm Slaves displayed on the liquid crystal screen. Their armor was so rounded that one of the figures looked as if it were wearing a down vest. It resembled the American-made M6, but this model lacked a head. There was only a small periscope attached.

"This is the enemy AS: the Mistral II, manufactured by France Zito. It's often exported to the Islamic world and parts of South America. Its electric system is simple, but it's a tough mech."

At that point, a helicopter pilot raised his hand.

"Yes?"



"A question, sir. The Mistral II . . . it's still a model in active service, I believe. From where would those terrorists get so many of them?"

"In mid-July, contact was lost with a transport ship off Sri Lanka that was loaded with similar mechs intended to supply the Indonesian army. The ship was discovered sunken three days later—but apparently, the cargo and *nearly* all the crew were gone."

"I see . . ."

The crew members either were bribed or comprised a terrorist cell in the first place.

"Let's get back on topic. Regarding these French-made Arm Slaves, we can deal with them with normal equipment and tactics. Same with the antiaircraft artillery. But there's one enemy mech to which the utmost caution must be applied." Kalinin switched the onscreen image. A picture of *that one mech* was displayed.

Sousuke saw it and stopped breathing momentarily. Behind him, Kurz groaned a little. Apparently having noticed them, Mao glanced their way from a nonadjacent seat. The other members who had never seen this type before were frowning. It was *that* mech: the same type as the one that was fought four months ago. The mech in the picture was not silver but red, and there were a few differences in



the head shape. However, there was no mistake. It had reappeared. Of course, the pilot from that time—Gauron—was dead, but Sousuke was stricken with a hallucination of that extremely dangerous man's ghost prowling around the base.

"The U.S. special forces were wiped out by this one mech. There's absolutely no indication of what country it's from, but like the M9, it's a Third Generation AS. Its power source is a palladium reactor. Its capacity for silence is surpassingly excellent. Although this is perhaps elementary, it's presumed to be equipped with invisible-mode ECS. That's probably what the red coating is for."

ECS was stealth equipment that could conceal machinery from radar waves, infrared rays, and various electromagnetic waves. With the latest model ECS that Mithril used, even the permeation of visible light was possible. But due to a technological hurdle, it was poor at eliminating short wavelength colors—purple, for example. Conversely, long wavelength colors, such as red, were relatively easy to conceal.

"So, this mech's good at walking around invisibly and launching surprise attacks like ours?"

"That's correct. Make use of ECCS—an anti-ECS sensor. This mech is loaded with yet another special apparatus, and normal attack



procedures will be wholly ineffective. If you happen to encounter this AS," Kalinin said as he scanned his subordinates' faces, "Avoid direct confrontation. In short, run."

Everyone was taken aback by this.

"Run'? That's ridiculous."

"We're there to *suppress* them."

"We'd be better off not attacking them from the start."

A loud roar rattled the room.

Once again, Captain McAllen shouted, "Quiet down!" but this time it wasn't as effective.

Kurz looked toward the ceiling and raised his voice as if he were complaining. "You guys wanna die?" His voice was not as loud as McAllen's, but his one utterance caused a strange quiet in the room.

The soldiers turned their skeptical visages toward Kurz.

"The lieutenant commander's right," said Kurz. "This thing's bad news. It's different. At any rate, fifty-seven-millimeter shells don't do a thing to it. It practically uses magic."

"Huh? What's it got, the Force—like Darth Vader?" said one of the members saracastically.

Kurz looked at him indifferently and said, "That's right. It uses the Force."



"Well, that sucks. We all should go train with Yoda," the member responded laughing.

Kurz didn't laugh.

"It seems you don't know what you're dealing with," said Kalinin, who had waited patiently for the crowd to settle down. "When I said 'run,' it wasn't a suggestion or a request. It was an *order*. Those who ignore it will be punished severely. That is, if they survive."

A hush fell over the room.

"We'll refer to this AS as Venom, for convenience. It's extremely dangerous, but it must be removed for the sake of the operation. Engaging Venom and destroying it will be Sergeant Sagara's job."

The team members looked at Sousuke for the first time. Sousuke wasn't especially surprised. He had been thinking he'd probably become its opponent. "With the Arbalest, sir?" Sousuke asked for confirmation.

"Correct. If Venom is encountered, the others will fall back and offer you support. Use teamwork and keep it in close combat. Don't give it time to rest. Ultimately, our chance to win will come."

"And if I'm defeated?"

Kalinin met Sousuke's gaze and said coolly, "The mission will fail. All your allies will become Venom's prey."



Sousuke felt as though he had the weight of everyone in the room on his shoulders. He had pulled through dangerous missions—situations during which he was a step away from death—countless times now. But that was just as an individual combatant. Even if he had made a mistake, he was the only one who would have died. That was no laughing matter, but in any case, his responsibility level still had only been as one of the team. He was merely a mercenary . . . a supporting role . . . a future statistic described as “one casualty.” That was how it was supposed to be. But since the incident when he encountered the Arbalest and Kaname Chidori, it felt as though everything had changed. The existence of the AS and that girl conceivably could save him from failure.

I can't lose. I can't make any mistakes. I'm not even allowed to die, Sousuke thought, mulling over this dreadfully heavy pressure. With an increasingly sullen face, Sousuke gazed at the floor and quietly answered, “Understood, sir.”

“Good. Carry out your duty as an NCO.”

Everyone turned back to the operational commander.

“Deployment will take place from the water this time—withdrawal by helicopter. The six Arm Slaves will split into three teams: one attack, one sniper, and one bomb disposal. Further, there’s

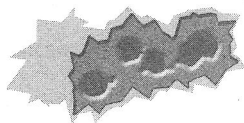


good news about the disposal team's infiltration route. That concludes the outline. Check with your captain for details. McAllen!"

"Sir!"

Kalinin stepped back and McAllen stepped forward to take his place.

"First, AS team organization! The attack team is myself and Sagara. The sniper team is Weber and Nguyen. The bomb disposal team is Mao and Dunnigan. The other SRT personnel will stand by in helicopters as infantry squad commanders. Further, our radio frequency—"

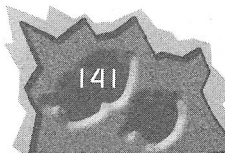


August 27, 16:21 (Greenwich Mean Time)

Tuatha de Danaan, Main Hangar

When the briefing ended, Sousuke walked toward the main hangar to start his meeting with the engineering officer.

The ARX-7 Arbalest had been coated dark gray overnight. It was a quick measure, just a spraying of the same coating used for





the M9s over the white armor. The white stood out too much for a genuinely covert operation.

Like the M9, the Arbalest's form was close to that of a human. The joints were highly pliable, and the limbs were long and slender. At the same time, it was powerful and closely resembled a strong, agile warrior. Its head was specially shaped, too. It had dual sensors like two sharp eyes, and beneath them, a hard point installed for equipment retention. The peculiar features suggested a ninja with a scroll in his mouth from some old period drama.

The four wing-shaped parts, two mounted on each shoulder, were radiator units to aid in cooling. It was possible to equip these parts with similarly shaped sub condensers or, depending on the situation, weapons. Due to this unique family of parts and its sharp form, a mythical aura surrounded the mech. It was almost as if touching it would summon divine wrath.

Built to include the obscure equipment called the Lambda Driver, the Arbalest really *was* mystical. According to the engineering officer in charge of the Arbalest, the Lambda Driver was primarily composed of three components: One was the equipment known as TAROS installed in the cockpit. TAROS stood for Transfer and Response Omni-Sphere, something the engineering officer didn't



even understand. What she did understand was that it seemed to have the ability to read the neural pulses in the passenger's entire body and convert them into special electrical signals.

Another component was the Lambda Driver's core, a module about the size of a small refrigerator. The interior seemed to be composed of a cylindrical bundle of beautiful laserlike multicolored light; but as to what function this served, she had no idea. When in drive mode, it seemed to momentarily expend an enormous amount of electrical power, which is why a spare condenser was installed on the mech. This module was directly connected to the mech's AI AI, but no matter how much the software was analyzed, what their relationship was remained unknown.

The final component was the frame system, which supported the mech's entire body. Basically, it was the same as the M9—a seemingly composite material of titanium alloy and ceramic and such—but some strange material was molded into its wick. A minute crystalline configuration was connected up in a complex pattern almost like a neural network—and when electricity was passed through, it would transform. However, sure enough, what function this served was completely unknown. The point is that the mech was filled with mysteries.



When the AI Al was started up, it always would indicate: "Seargant Sagara's presence is required to run the Lambda Driver." It wouldn't reject other operators outright, but when tests were run with others piloting it, the Lambda Driver never would run.

Sergeant Sagara was necessary. All attempts to erase that display had met with failure. Even reinitializing Al made no difference. If any other forceful measures were applied, Al consistently would return an error and freeze.

"So, that's what it comes down to? We give up," said the young engineering officer, Ensign Nora Lemming, as she threw up her hands in defeat. "All I can say is that maybe this machine has some kind of force of will amplifier. Not like I really want to say something as occultish as that."

"What about the person who built it?" The corners of Sousuke's mouth turned down even farther as he gazed up at the Arbalest.

"I heard he died. Now the only one left who knows more about the Lambda Driver than I do is the captain—but only in that she also has an understanding of the TAROS."

"I see."

"That's why we can't make a new one of these mechs. Because there were a few spare parts still around, we got the severed arm



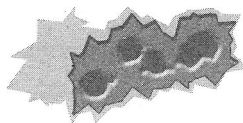
back in shape; but the next time it loses its left arm, all we can do is appropriate M9 parts.”

“I’ll be careful.”

“It’s okay, though. You’ve managed to get it to run twice now without prior practice. I’m sure you’ve got what it takes.”

“What it . . . takes?” asked Sousuke.

“Right. That’s a lovely present God gave you. So, be confident in yourself, Sergeant Sagara,” the ensign said with a smile.

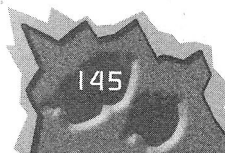


August 27, 16:55 (Greenwich Mean Time)

Tuatha de Danaan, Galley

No matter how curious a place it was, after a day, Kaname eventually grew tired of the sights inside the submarine, running out of places where she could observe and out of things to do.

Sousuke and the others said something about a meeting and left, and as for Tessa, she had hardly seen Kaname since morning. As Kaname looked in on the command center, Tessa was engrossed in





discussing something with the commander, and all she did was send greetings by way of a glance.

Kaname was bored. *It's about time for me to leave*, she thought.

She heard it would be the day after tomorrow when the submarine would finish its business and return to base. If Kaname wanted, a helicopter would take her and Sousuke back before that so they could hurry back to Tokyo, but that was only after the operation was complete. She had to loaf about the inside of the sub until tomorrow.

With nothing else to do, Kaname went to the mess hall's galley and helped the cook with his work. She focused her undivided attention on chopping up a mountain of onions, then carrots, and next potatoes—from one to the next. It was perfect for killing time.

"You're pretty good at this," the cook—one of the few Japanese onboard—said, keenly impressed by Kaname's carving knife handling.

"Thanks a lot."

"You know what you're doing with an oven, too. Why not quit school and get hired on this submarine? I'll teach you the soul of deep sea cooking."

"Ha ha ha. I'll pass on that one."



As Kaname laughed, a ship-wide broadcast started: "This is the captain." It was Tessa's voice. "This ship now will enter the zone of operation. There are no hostile surface or underwater ships in this operation. Also, there are no plans for this craft to engage in combat. However, as usual, we will act like a shadow. With the efforts of this ship and everyone on it, that should not be that hard a task. Please do your jobs carefully and precisely, as always. May God's divine protection be with us." A small cough came over the speaker. "So, please go to level two battle stations. That is all."

The broadcast ended. A bell rang to signal battle stations. It sounded exactly like a real one, but it was probably electronic. Several crewmen hanging out in the mess hall next to the galley stood up hurriedly and ran to their respective duty stations.

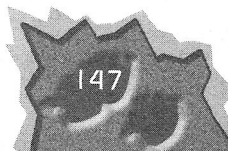
"Ah, so it begins," grumbled the cook.

Kaname felt a little uneasy. "They're going to fight now?"

"Yeah, but you don't need to worry. This sub probably won't fight. It should be the SRT guys who do that."

"SRT?"

"It means Special Response Team. Sergeant Sagara's one of them."





Sousuke's going to fight now. Reminded of that again, Kaname felt unable to relax. She had seen him fight before and had been in terrible situations with him herself, but this was the first time it had been like this.

He's going to fight. Knowing this somehow felt oppressive to Kaname. "Hey, maybe I'll go wander."

"Huh?"

Kaname left the surprised cook behind and ran out of the galley, through the corridors heavy with people coming and going, and headed for the ready room where Sousuke and the others were gathered. However, it was completely empty. After going to two or three other places she thought of and not finding them, she went to the hangar.

"Ah." Sousuke was standing and talking in front of an already armed AS. He wore a jet black AS pilot suit and was conversing with a woman in fatigues, who was holding a clipboard-style electronic terminal. Not too far from Sousuke gathered Kurz, Mao, and an Asian team member whose name Kaname didn't know.

Kurz was the first to notice her. "Kaname? Why are you out of breath? Oh, I know, you've brought me a good luck charm. They say it's always done wonders, a maiden's voy—ugh!"



Mao's elbow rammed into Kurz' solar plexus, causing him to squat down in pain.

Her temple twitching, Mao said to Kurz, "Why do you always gotta be like that?" Turning, she added, "So, what's up, Kaname?"

"Um, well, not much. I just, I mean . . ." Kaname grew flustered. She wasn't even sure herself what she'd come for.

When she glanced in Sousuke's direction, he still was talking shop with the engineer. He gave no notice to her presence at all. He seemed so serious that speaking to him lightheartedly seemed unfeasible.

"Aha. It's dangerous in here. Arm Slaves will be walking around before we deploy," Mao said.

"O-okay."

"We're at battle stations right now. So, I'm sorry, but . . . okay?"

Kaname knew what that was supposed to mean. Mao was telling her to get out, in a roundabout way. Feeling a little alienated, Kaname nodded.

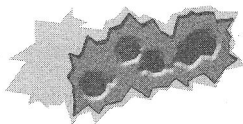
"Yeah. Sorry to bother you." With nothing else to do, Kaname turned on her heel. She slowly walked to the hangar exit, and then she turned around one more time.



FULL METAL PANIC!

Mao made a gesture of supplication, and Kurz was waving his hand.

In the end, Sousuke had failed to notice Kaname. Fixated on his silhouette from a distance, she got the feeling they were in two different worlds. *Is this my farewell look, or will that not happen?* she wondered.



August 27, 17:50 (Greenwich Mean Time)

**Perio Archipelago, 15 Miles Northeast of Berildaobu Island
Tuatha de Danaan**

Prior to deployment, the command center was flooded with the voices of subordinates.

“Present depth: eighty. Speed: three knots. EMFC, no problems.”

“Turtle one, depth: ten . . . five . . . stopped.”

“This is sonar. No aircraft detected on the surface.”

“ESM contacts. They’re U.S. Navy surface ships. Now analyzing . . .”





"Ocean current: two knots from the northwest. Light breeze on surface."

"This is Urzu One. I've entered airtight chamber number one."

"This is Urzu Seven. Finished guiding mech into number two airtight chamber."

"ESM: analysis complete. Arleigh Burke class destroyer at bearing zero-eight-zero. Ticonderoga class cruiser at bearing zero-seven-nine. Estimated distance of both: more than thirty miles."

"This is starboard, number one airtight chamber controller. Internal hatch closure complete. Airtightness ensured."

"This is port number two airtight chamber controller. Internal hatch closure complete. Airtightness ensured. We can flood it anytime."

Reports came in to Tessa one after another. While paying attention to all of them, she briskly gave out directions. "Good. Please commence flooding of number one through number six airtight chambers."

"Aye, ma'am. Commencing flooding of number one through number six airtight chambers," Mardukas complied.

This time, the Arm Slaves would deploy through the water. The mechs would swim secretly to the island objective, carrying out a surprise attack.



There were three airtight chambers large enough to house mechs on either side of the hangar, and it was from these that the M9s and ARX-7 were exiting the submarine. Now, McAllen and company were in their respective Arm Slaves inside these chambers. All that was left to do was check the hatches.

"Now then . . ." As a final check, Tessa looked around on the surface. Taking control of the turtle, she used a small control stick to maneuver the optical sensors. The robot floating very close to the surface thrust up a small periscope-like object for a short time and engaged in a three-hundred-sixty-degree search. The vivid image was reflected on the captain's screen.

The night sea was extra black, and because there were absolutely no man-made lights nearby and the air was clear, the sky was beautiful. A countless number of stars sat above the horizon, twinkling in abundant hues. It was enough to make one sigh.

For an instant, a foolish thought went through Kaname's head. The operation would be halted here, the submarine would be surfaced, and everyone would go up on deck to breathe in the fresh air . . . if only she and Sousuke could see those stars with their own eyes. *How wonderful would that be?*

"Captain?" Mardukas spoke up.

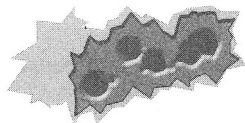


Tessa switched the screen to night vision mode as though nothing had happened and verified that no military vessels or aircraft were nearby. No problems anywhere. The only tasks that remained were to send them out.

She glanced at the front screen's status board. The displayed figures and characters indicated the status of the airtight chambers: 2nd ATC—□\ARX-7 (Urzu Seven).

It's all right. He's very strong. Besides, he has Mao, Kurz, and the others with him. Teletha Testarossa breathed in and gave the order: "Release all AS hatches."

"Aye, ma'am. Release all AS hatches!"



There was a small tremor, followed by a muffled blub sound, and then the number two hatch opened. Seawater rushed in all around the AS. Through the night vision sensors, the green sea spread out before Sousuke's eyes.

Right now on the Arbalest, optional underwater equipment was installed. Inside the unit, fastened onto the torso, was an oxygen tank and ballast, and a high output water jet. In a crisis, it also could expand into a hydrofoil and glide on the surface at high speed.



The Arbalest and M9s were not completely made for underwater environments, so the greatest depth at which they could be submerged was about four hundred thirty-one feet. But in a normal operation, that degree of waterproofing was sufficient.

Okay . . . Sousuke increased the thrust of his water jet and departed from the ship. Behind him, the hatch closed immediately. The M9s that came out of the other hatches left thin trails of bubbles as they passed the Arbalest.

"Ha ha. All right, time for our resort tour," Kurz's voice resounded as one M9 rotated around in the water.

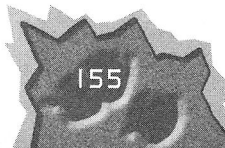
McAllen's voice sounded: "Stop jabbering, dipstick."

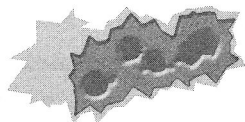
"Aw, c'mon."

"C'mon nothing! Damn it all. Let's go," announced Captain McAllen's M9, guiding his subordinates. Holding their waterproof weapons containers in both hands, the Arbalest and the four M9s followed after him. They formed a neat line, or perhaps a formation, and cruised at one hundred feet, their speed increasing quickly.

Behind them, the *de Danaan* pointed its bow downward, diving into even deeper water without a sound.

You know, I haven't even said a thing to Chidori, thought Sousuke.





They swam for nearly twenty minutes. The water was pitch dark, but they could make out the sea floor through night vision sensors. Because until a moment ago, they couldn't even see that much, it meant the sea was that much more shallow and land that much closer.

A school of tropical fish was swimming near rugged rocks. If seen in the light of day, they would no doubt appear brilliantly colored.

"Sousuke?" Mao called to him on the radio. It was a channel different from the one operation orders were on.

"What?"

"Aren't you a little worked up?"

Hearing the question, Sousuke became a little shaken. "What's this about?"

"Don't hide it. No one else is listening to this channel."

"That's unrelated. I'm—"

"Enough. I mean, you didn't even notice Kaname earlier, did you?"

"Earlier? When, earlier?"



Mao sounded as if she were smiling ruefully. "See, you're not seeing what's around you. You're worried about what the lieutenant commander said, right? About that Venom . . ."

"Well, of course. If I mess up, everyone on the team dies. Being mindful of how heavy the responsibility is—"

"That's no good. You need to adjust your attitude about this."

"Why? This isn't even like you."

McAllen was the current team leader, but when it was the three of them on other missions, Mao commonly was team leader. She had a strong sense of responsibility, and it seemed strange for her to say such a thing.

"Because. Usually, if I were to dwell on something like you are now, *that's* what would make me constantly screw up. You can't place all of this on your shoulders. If you don't approach this with the expectation that things will work out, your morale won't stand up to it."

"But . . ."

"You plan to protect *us* along with Kaname?"

Those words startled him. Sousuke was hard pressed to come up with an answer, and Mao laughed a little. "Thanks for the thought, but no need to worry. I'm sure Kurz, McAllen, and the rest would say the same thing."



In their place, Sousuke would say it, too. They were not mere soldiers. They were handpicked elite—and of course, they knew how to take care of themselves. They would not launch a reckless assault, and they had the power to get away from danger. That was what it came down to.

“You have a point. I’ll remember it,” Sousuke assured Mao.

“I respect your honesty,” replied Mao before closing the channel.

But, thought Sousuke after less than a minute, if a regular AS went up against that enemy mech, it’d never survive. Twelve U.S. Arm Slaves were wiped out by only one. That’s an undeniable fact. If I lose, it’s over.

No matter what, he couldn’t get that thought out of his head.

Instructions came in over the operations channel: “Urzu Seven to all units. We just passed waypoint three. As planned, we’ll now split into three teams. Got it?”

After passing this waypoint, the six mechs headed for their respective positions. The infiltration team was to neutralize the bombs set on the chemical weapons, the suppression team was to land directly on the base, and the sniper team was to support the landing with the entire island in their field of fire.



After the suppression operation began, they would attack the enemy from three directions: underground, the beach, and from outside enemy firing range.

"Urzu Two, roger," said Mao over the operations channel.

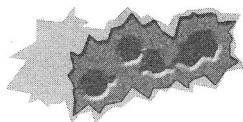
"Urzu Six, roger," Weber replied.

"Urzu Seven, roger," said Sagara.

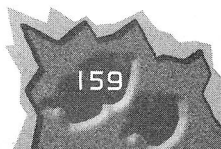
"Urzu Ten, roger," copied Nguyen.

"Urzu Twelve, roger," added Dunnigan.

All units responded, and they deployed in twos to their positions.



The infiltration team comprised Mao and Sergeant Dunnigan. Dunnigan was from Louisiana in the American South, and was originally a U.S. Army paratrooper. He was about the same age as Mao, but he looked somewhat older. He had an imposing physique, and he was a big-muscled man who easily could bench a two-hundred-twenty-pound barbell. He was an AS pilot, of course, but also an explosives expert. That was why he was chosen for this team.





The first part of their job was to go ahead of the other four mechs, sneak into the chemical weapons storehouse, and neutralize the bombs that were supposed to be rigged there. The infiltration route was from underground. The western side of the island formed a low cliff, and there was an old tunnel underwater. It was constructed more than half a century ago as a secret dock to be used as a submarine base for the old Japanese navy. The tunnel had collapsed due to multiple earthquakes over the long period of time and was completely sunken into the water. It had been forgotten by everyone, including the resident U.S. military.

The thickness of the bedrock separating the deepest part of the tunnel from the storehouse was about six-and-a-half feet. First, the team would create a hole with a drill, take a look at the inside of the storehouse with a fiberscope, and thereafter, blast the bedrock. Afterward, they would rush in and destroy the detonators—or so went the plan.

“We’re close to land. About time to kill the jets.”

“Yeah, gotcha,” sounded the operations channel.

The backpack water jets ceased, and the myriad fine bubbles disappeared. The two M9s used the fins equipped on their legs—AS-sized leg fins—to silently progress sixteen feet below the surface.



Dunnigan's skill was flawless, to the extent that he didn't seem to come from a land combat background. It was said that he also had plenty of combat experience. While in the U.S. Army, he undertook many dangerous missions and apparently had been awarded multiple medals, such as the Purple Heart and Bronze Star. He was the polar opposite of Mao, who hardly had received any decorative medals and was dishonorably discharged from the Marine Corps.

That difference was not the reason why, but Mao was not especially close with Dunnigan. He had transferred from Mithril's South Atlantic battle group Nemed only two months ago. That he was capable was certain, but Mao still didn't have a grasp of his personality or beliefs.

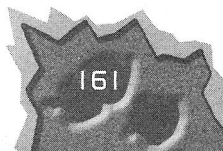
When they were within a mile of the island, Dunnigan said quietly, "What a pain in the ass. Really."

"What is?" asked Mao.

"Being way out in the sticks like this. Doing such a tedious mission. Just let some other folks do it."

"Ha ha. Don't complain like that. This is something nobody but us can do."

"Don't matter. Even if these bombs *do* blow up, the blast won't amount to much. I mean, maybe a few poor hicks around here will buy the farm."





"Dunnigan?"

"Just jokin' with you. Don't take it seriously, China girl."

Dunnigan was always joking, but instead of trying to roll with it, Mao said in a purposely hard voice, "I don't think it's a joke you should make during an operation. And I'm not 'China girl'—I'm Melissa Mao."

"That you are. Yeah, well, don't dwell on it. I'll do my job right. Right as rain."

"That's all I can ask."

The two mechs floated toward the island, approaching the western shore as if riding the ocean current. With the aid of high frequency sonar and GPS data, they soon found their objective: the collapsed tunnel.

The entrance was blocked by collapsed concrete and pieces of rock. There wasn't even a gap big enough for a human to get through. But with an M9's power, dislodging these obstacles wasn't difficult. The waves were high and it was night, so the danger of being noticed by the enemy was small.

What they needed to be more careful about was the possible presence of enemy traps. If the enemy already knew about the infiltration route, the operation would be suspended. They would do



nothing but fall back, forced to contact their allies and tell them to return to base. The plan would be done over again from scratch, and they would have to think of some other way.

It might seem as though it were a waste of resources to an outsider, but it was far better than steamrolling it. The pattern of specialized warfare was, unlike in the movies, terribly subdued and demanding of patience. But this time seemed to be different.

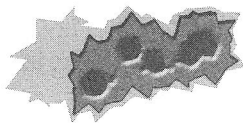
Mao deliberately and warily utilized all her M9's sensors to search for danger, but there were no signs of traps in the vicinity of the tunnel.

"You're sure, right?" Dunnigan asked.

"Affirmative. I could guarantee it," answered Mao.

"Then, in we go. . . ."

The two mechs removed the rock and stepped into the tunnel. As they couldn't communicate via radio underground, they placed a wired relay at the tunnel entrance.



Kurz and Corporal Nguyen made up the sniper team. Nguyen originated from the Vietnamese army. Excellent at jungle combat, his knife combat



skills were formidable. He also was knowledgeable of AS weaponry, both eastern and western. He had a slender build and brown skin, and looked like a sunken-cheeked, unhealthy man—but in actuality, he was tough. Not unlike his knife handling, his eyes were as sharp as a hawk's.

Nguyen had transferred from another battle group two months ago, as Dunnigan had. They still hadn't completed many missions together, but Nguyen was a reliable one who did the work he had before him. He also had a sense of humor.

"This is Urzu Six. We're about at the sniping point. Setting depth at zero."

"Confirmed. Keep your ass low," answered Nguyen as he adjusted his M9's posture.

Their sniper team had reached the sea two-and-a-half miles east of Berildaobu Island. This area had become shoals, and water depth was a mere thirteen feet. It was shallow enough for an M9's upper half to poke above the water just by standing up.

The arrangement was to use this as a sniping point to attack the enemy mechs and antiair artillery at the base. The American M6s would have a faint hope of launching an effective attack from this long a range, but it was a different story with the M9s' equipment and weapons control systems.



"What's the assigned Preferred Firing Zone?" Nguyen asked regarding target selection.

"We don't need one. I fire from the right. You fire from the left. Simple, eh?"

"Are you sure that'll cover it?"

"It's fine."

The two mechs started preparing to attack. In a position three-hundred-twenty-eight feet from Nguyen, Kurz's mech opened its weapons container it had transported. Kurz's weapon was a seventy-six-millimeter sniper cannon. As artillery for independent AS use, it was of a more powerful class. It was of the highest accuracy, equipped with an optical sensor and self-diagnosis sensor independent of the M9, along with a ballistic calculation computer.

Nguyen's mech had brought along an eight-shot ground-to-ground missile launcher. The missiles were a model of Hellfire air-to-surface missiles used by attack helicopters made for surface firing. They were high precision and powerful, and their smokeless rocket motors made them hard to spot by the enemy.

"Wonder if things are working out for my girl and crew," Kurz murmured.



Nguyen snorted so loudly that it was audible over the radio. "If they mess up, all we can do is run for it. I don't get paid enough for a firefight in a poison gas cloud."

"You can say that again," answered Kurz.

Nguyen kept complaining. "Mithril's equipment and pay are good and all, but they do things too slowly. Protecting hostages, watching out for chemical weapons—it's enough to give you an ulcer, don't you think?"

"Well, true, typical storm troopers probably wouldn't go to this much trouble."

It was because they carried out delicate operations that corresponded with their equipment and wages. Even Kurz, who constantly complained, had a handle on that.

"Yeah, but Kurz, we're mercenaries, man—hit men who work for hire. I won't hesitate to fight the client's enemies, but doesn't slapping us with unnecessary orders about other problems go against contract?"

"It does? I never really read my contract," Kurz answered.

Nguyen groaned. "Think again. This job is still a business, man. A business."

"It's not that big a deal, is it?"

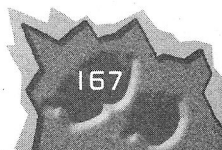
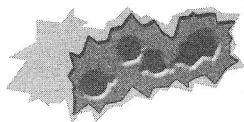


"Yes it is. If you don't think it's worth it, you'd better decide where to get rehired."

"Rehired, huh?" Kurz answered in a dispirited voice. Nguyen's idle gossip was one thing, but Kurz was worried about Sousuke. That AS—the Arbalest or whatever. Kurz had thought about this before, but why did it have to be Sousuke who piloted it? He had the feeling McAllen or Mao would be more qualified. Sousuke was Kaname's guard and had to combat in a prototype mech. Wasn't it cruel to push such heavy responsibilities on him alone?

He's too straight and narrow normally. Kurz was aware of Sousuke's seriousness and strong sense of responsibility. He thought that was what made him charming as a colleague, although he would never say it out loud. *But isn't it being used in a bad way right now? Oh well . . .* Kurz changed his mind. If that Venom showed up, he would let his sniper cannon do the talking for him. Even if this seventy-six-millimeter cannon didn't deliver a decisive blow, it could at least make Sousuke's job easier.

Hiding himself under the water's surface, Kurz continued to wait for the start of battle.





Sousuke and Captain McAllen served as the attack team. Once Mao and Dunnigan disposed of the bombs, Kurz and Nguyen would begin attacking from long distance. At the same time, Sousuke and McAllen would land on the island at high speed, striking the remaining enemy. Mao and Dunnigan would surface from the storehouse and support the combat. Once AS combat began, the de Danaan would surface. Helicopters carrying infantry would take off from the ship and fly to this base in order to fully suppress it. That was the plan.

Sousuke's Arbalest and McAllen's M9 already had approached within two thousand feet of the beach. An M6, with its gas-turbine power source, probably couldn't get this close. But even the Mithril M9s couldn't advance in water any shallower without being spotted by the enemy. The ECS on the M9 and Arbalest, unlike that used by the de Danaan when surfaced, couldn't be used while half the mech was submerged in water.

The Arbalest stuck only the top half of its head through the waves to survey the island. The night vision mode dual sensors perceived the base surrounded by a fence and low buildings illuminated by glaring lights. Having already suffered one attack, scars were visible here and there.



One of the enemy's self-propelled antiaircraft artillery also was visible. On top of the caterpillar-style frame were situated two machine cannon turrets. The Arbalest's AI automatically finished identification and displayed the weapon type: Soviet-made 2S6M Tunguska self-propelled antiaircraft artillery. Though it was called "antiaircraft," it still presented a substantial threat against Arm Slaves. Should it notice him, the Arbalest probably would take a hail of thirty-millimeter shells.

One enemy AS on watch was walking along the shore in front of the base. Its searchlight shone on the water, and it kept going back and forth the same way. As was explained in the briefing, it was a French-made Mistral II. It had a somewhat short and stout humanoid shape, but it had no head. The main sensors were situated between the legs. The Mistral II's armor surpassed the Soviet-made Rk-92 Savage in defensive power, and its firing accuracy was several steps higher.

There should have been other enemies, but buildings and terrain formed blind spots, and they were not visible from this position. Venom was nowhere to be seen. Scorched AS remains had been left behind on the beach. It was one of the defeated American Dark Bushnells. Its form was twisted and its arm was raised toward the night sky, as if it had died in agony.



Men had stood up unknowingly against an opponent that even the newly produced M9 couldn't oppose, but they did so with M6s, which were a generation older. How powerless must they have felt?

An hour passed. The day was dawning. According to the schedule, Mao and Dunnigan, who had infiltrated from underground, should have destroyed the detonator by now. But as of yet, nothing had changed at the base.

Venom was still nowhere to be found. *Is it undergoing maintenance in the hangar? Is it invisible through ECS and concealing itself somewhere? What if it snuck into the water and is now creeping toward us? What if it's ambushing Mao's team right now? What if it's about to attack Kurz's team?* Questions with no basis arose and vanished one after another. Sousuke couldn't calm down.

A transmission came in from the nearby M9: "Sergeant Sagara." It was McAllen.

"Yes sir."

"I've been taking part in AS operations of this or that nature for nine years."

Sousuke said nothing in response.

"In other words . . . well, hell . . . I've seen good mechs, and I've seen dodgy ones. So, from what I've seen, that mech you're piloting

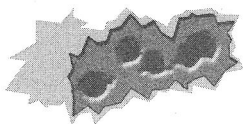


doesn't seem so terrible. You just apply the same devotion you always do, and no worries. Do what you always do. Hear me?"

Perhaps saying such a thing was simply McAllen's way of expressing consideration. He always talked a lot and left the impression that he was an eccentric to others, but his awareness and sense of responsibility as a field commander were strong.

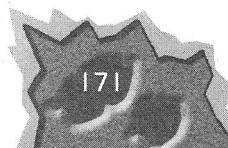
"Yes sir, captain." Though he answered positively, Sousuke couldn't get the image of the crushed M6, washed by the waves, out of his head.

A short time passed. The sound of a muffled explosion came from the direction of the base.



The explosion was from the underground part of the storehouse. For a second, Sousuke thought it was the bombs set up on the chemical weapons, but it wasn't—it was a smaller-scale explosion. Black smoke wafted up through the storehouse entrance, and the enemy soldiers on guard were shouting something to one another.

It's begun, thought Sousuke.





He set the vocal command switch on his stick to *on*, and then he said, "Al. Set power level to military."

"Roger. GPL: military. Output rising. Twenty . . . thirty . . ." announced the mech's AI AI in a low male voice.

The generator output numbers that had been kept at their lowest levels quickly climbed.

"This is Urzu Two! Destruction of detonator successful! I repeat, destruction of detonator successful! Now heading topside!" It was Mao's report. Radio silence was lifted. The bombs had been successfully dealt with.

"This is Urzu Six. I'm ready anytime."

"This is Urzu Ten. Same here," Kurz and Nguyen's sniper team reported.

". . . sixty . . . seventy . . . eighty . . ."

The vast amount of electric power coming from the generator spread through the Arbalest. There were small electrical discharges from various joints, followed by a pale light. The electromagnetic muscles creaked, and the mech shuddered.

". . . ninety . . . ninety-five . . . one hundred!"

It had to be done now. Sousuke took a deep breath.

"Urzu One to all units. Hunting ban lifted. Attack!"



"Roger." Sousuke pulled the left stick's throttle trigger with all his might.

The partially submerged unit's water jet fired at maximum power. A waterspout exploded in the sea behind him. *Chonk!* The mech that had been diving underwater suddenly sprung up out of the sea, charging at the land as it spat out a slew of water.

Acceleration. More acceleration. The knot count on the speedometer climbed steadily, causing the Arbalest to shake violently. It glided as if pressing down the waves, bearing down on the sandy beach. Five hundred feet more . . . three hundred thirty more . . .

The Mistral II on watch noticed the Arbalest and aimed its rifle. The Arbalest advanced directly toward it, giving the Mistral II no chance to evade—the machine guns in its head fired on full auto. A hundred or more twelve-point-seven-millimeter rounds sprayed in the space of a second, plowing into the enemy mech's whole body. The firm armor repelled the bullets, and countless sparks scattered the surface. Sousuke's opponent reflexively drew back to shield his own sensors, creating an opening of only a few seconds.

Those few seconds were enough. The Arbalest ran aground on the beach at high speed and made a low bound. A cloud of sand



formed. Yielding to inertia, he rolled on the sand and rammed into the enemy violently. The Arbalest and Mistral II fell in a tangle.

The enemy mech hurriedly raised its upper half, trying to stab the Arbalest with the monofilament cutter affixed to its rifle. But even faster, the Arbalest pressed the barrel of its shot cannon into the enemy's flank. Due to the discharge, the Mistral II ate a fifty-seven-millimeter round at point-blank range and was blown away. The mech was all but blown in half at the waist as it scattered oil, spouted flames, and bore into the ground.

That's one, noted Sousuke. The defeat of that one mech awoke his warrior's sense of smell.

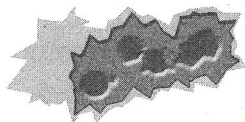
Explosions were already occurring in succession at the base. It was Kurz's sniping and Nguyen's missile attacks. McAllen also had successfully reached land. He smashed an antiaircraft artillery with an antitank dagger, took a carbine rifle off his back, and started moving.

Sousuke immediately stood up his mech and forced the removal of the underwater unit fastened onto the torso. The explosive bolts went off, and the unit flew apart in front and back.

The Arbalest faced another Mistral II, which had appeared and leaped fiercely. *Aiming. Percussion. Evasion. Searching. Aiming again.*



That's right. This is my flesh and blood, like always. Nothing's changed, Sousuke reminded himself. Fight. Defeat. Shoot. Cut. Strike. Tear and burn. Trample. What's this sense of security? Venom? So, what about it? No matter what you call it, it's just a "suppression objective." Use all means to destroy it. Forget protecting. That'll do until I bite out its windpipe—until I end its life. Hurry and get out of here.



The Same Time

Depth: 98 Feet

Tuatha de Danaan, Central Command Center

"It has begun. We have a combat signal from M9 ADMs!" the Combat Intelligence Officer (CIO) announced in a rather tense voice.

"All units?" Tessa asked from the captain's chair.

"Affirmative, ma'am."

"Then, we will surface. Please raise all ECS masts. Normal MBT blow."



After hearing the orders, Mardukas showed signs of hesitation. There was no problem with the ECS masts. They were equipment for concealing the de Danaan from the radar of other warships as it surfaced, so of course, they would use them. But a “normal blow” was exceptional.

When a submarine rises to the surface, in order to give it buoyancy, a blow is performed in the MBT-main ballast tank. There are several methods for this. In the de Danaan’s case, it took time, but a special measure called a silent blow was taken so as to make discovery by nearby military vessels difficult. A normal blow allowed for surfacing in a short time, but the drainage sound was noisy, which made detection that much easier.

“What is the problem, Mr. Mardukas?” Tessa inquired.

“A normal blow?”

“I ordered it as such because time is fleeting.”

“Aye. I beg your pardon. Prepare to surface!” Mardukas pressed the surfacing warning switch.

A synthetic sound similar to a siren reverberated through the ship, along with the mother AI’s voice: “Surfacing! Surfacing! Surfacing!”

“Normal, low-pressure blow!”

“Normal, low-pressure blow, aye. Commencing low-pressure blow of entire MBT!”

“Raise all ECS masts! Activating electromagnetic camouflage.”



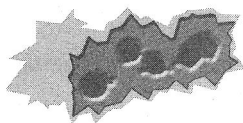
"ECS masts, aye. Number one, rising. Number two rising. Number three . . ."

"Surfacing! Surfacing! Surfacing!"

"This is the flight control room. To all helicopter squads, engine start!"

"Gebo three, four, five, six. Engine start!"

The transport helicopters in the hangar simultaneously started their several thousand HP turbo shaft engines. Surrounded by countless bubbles, the bow of the giant submarine lifted. There was a low roar, and the floor shook. The inside of the ship, which had been silent and on call went into a synchronous uproar.



"Wh-what's happening?" Surprised by the sudden tremor and noise, Kaname held the pot with curry simmering in it down with both hands.

"Well, the ship's going up to the surface," the cook answered. He was propping up the mound of dishes so they wouldn't fall.

"Why? Is there some problem?"

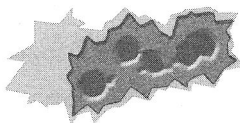
"I couldn't say, but we don't usually surface this noisily. Something may have happened to the SRT guys."



"To Sousuke?"

"Sergeant Sagara? I don't know. There might not be any problem at all."

"Oh." Kaname gazed up at the galley ceiling anxiously. *Sousuke . . . are you all right?*



August 28, 04:05 (Local Time)

Perio Archipelago

Berildaobu Island

In the morning sunrise, through the blazing flames, two Mistral IIs revealed themselves. They broke left and right, moving at high speed. They closed quickly while shooting alternating restraining fire.

A mediocre operator might try to gain distance while evading, but Sousuke was different. He stopped his Arbalest from running, kneeling down firmly on the spot. After all, the enemy wanted only to prevent him from attacking. It moved and fired flashily, and the next move was nothing more than an attempt at a sure shot.

That's right, keep on shooting, Sousuke mused.



The enemy's restraining fire impacted the Arbalest, and asphalt fragments and white smoke danced around. The AI appealed with an intermittent alarm with the principle that standing still was dangerous.

"Shut up." Sousuke held the shot cannon in both hands, aimed carefully, and fired.

One of the enemies was thrown backward. Metal fragments scattered, and the Mistral II was thrown to the ground. The severed right leg revolved and slammed into a neglected jeep. After another shot, the fallen mech bounced off the ground, did a somersault, and exploded.

The shot cannon was out of ammo. Sousuke wanted to swap in a spare magazine, but the other mech was bearing down on the Arbalest. He rolled his mech forward, neatly avoiding the enemy's line of fire. When he coiled up and sprang forward, the enemy mech tossed away its rifle and drew a long-handled, hammer-shaped close-combat weapon. Rapidly approaching, the hammer was lowered. Sousuke barely avoided it, and the hammer hit the ground, exploding.

Fanned by the blast, Sousuke retreated his mech while instantly identifying the weapon. *A heat hammer*, he thought to himself with horror. At first glance, it was a long-handled hammer, but its head was a high-yield plastic explosive. It was disposable, of simple form, and inexpensive, but it was powerful enough to take out a tank in one hit.



The Mistral II threw away the headless handle and drew another heat hammer. This time, it swung it sideways. At dangerously close range, the Arbalest stooped to avoid it. It grabbed the enemy's shoulder with its left hand and attached the shot cannon to its head hard point. In other words, it put it in its mouth and drew a monofilament cutter with its empty right hand.

Clank! When the two mechs rammed hard into each other, the knife-shaped cutter thrust into the Mistral II's torso. The enemy mech shook as the painful sound of armor wrenching sustained for what seemed like forever.

Unfazed, Sousuke moved the monofilament cutter and tore the enemy's control system to shreds. That made the fourth. When it withdrew the knife, the Mistral II fell to its knees and collapsed forward. A weak stream of sparks and smoke escaped from the wound. Sousuke changed the magazine on his shot cannon and ran off with the agility of a panther in search of more enemy mechs.

Where are you, Venom? he wondered.

The Arbalest's head moved in increments. The ECCS sent radar waves from its forehead at full intensity, trying to detect even the slightest sign of the enemy.



Reports came in over the radio from one mech after another. "This is Urzu Six. All the targets I can see from here are taken care of. Send me some more enemies!"

"This is Urzu Twelve. We're above ground. B quarters suppressed and secured. One enemy infantry's dead, two are wounded. The hostages are safe."

"This is Urzu Ten. I destroyed all confirmed antiaircraft artillery."

"This is Urzu Two. I've suppressed and secured A quarters. Twenty-three hostages confirmed. All secured. Four enemy infantry subdued by taser."

There were nearly no problems. Most of the enemy Arm Slaves had been crushed, the infantry were arrested, and the base personnel who had been captured were protected by Mao and Dunnigan. But the main red mech hadn't been found.

"Urzu One to all units. We still haven't encountered Venom. Hasn't anyone seen it—just a trace of it? Report."

At their commander's call, they all answered, "Negative."

Immediately afterward, Mao said, "No, affirmative. What's this guy think he's up to?"

"What is it, Urzu Two?"





“Wha—?” McAllen and Dunnigan said in turn, both bewildered.

Sousuke soon knew the reason, too: Venom, the red AS, was at the northeast of the base, on top of the highest building, standing right in the open and not even using ECS. *What’s this supposed to mean?* he wondered suspiciously.

Venom was a somewhat large mech with a diamond-shaped head, a tapered silhouette, and a single red eye. If you were to render a poison arrowhead into humanoid form, maybe it would look like that. The AS gave an impression *that* pointed—that sinister.

Venom languidly moved its head around, glaring at the base wrapped in conflagration. In its hands was a large Gatling cannon, a difficult weapon to manage, but astoundingly powerful.

A voice came over the external speaker: “Hey now, hey now, all you Mithril people.”

Just hearing it made Sousuke’s heart leap.

“It’s been a while. I’ve missed you—especially Kashim. No, these days you go by Sagara, right?”

“Ga—”

Gauron. Sousuke hadn’t managed to utter his name, but the enemy answered jokingly. “Indubitably, it’s me,” announced the red AS as it laboriously pointed the cumbersome Gatling cannon.



CHAPTER 4

The Venom Infects

August 28, 04:11 (Local Time)

Perio Archipelago

Berildaobu Island

“So, party time. Let’s dance. Ha ha ha!” called Gauron in an effected feminine voice from the rooftop of the building as he fired his mech’s Gatling cannon wildly.

A Gatling cannon could fire at high speed through a rotating bundle of six barrels. A rifle couldn’t hold a candle to its rapid-fire speed.

“Urzu One to Urzu Six! Can you snipe him?”

“Negative. I can’t secure a line of fire from this position. I’m on the move.”

“Urzu Ten, what about the Hellfires?”



"Out of ammo, sir."

"Grah, son of a bitch!"

Thirty-five-millimeter rounds tore up buildings and asphalt like paper, driving Sousuke and the others to the ground. M9s ran at full speed about the area, turning white from fragments and smoke.

"Urzu Seven, forward! Everyone else, fall back and give him cover!" McAllen yelled into his radio.

"Seven, roger," Sousuke answered briefly, making the Arbalest run in a crouched position.

Gauron, you should be dead, Sousuke thought bitterly. *I've had enough.* Sousuke was sure he'd taken Gauron down that time in the North Korean mountains. He'd been wrong, though, and didn't yet know what kind of ill luck it was. In a situation during which he'd had to fight the clock for every second, there hadn't been time to confirm Gauron's death.

Gauron, what are you up to? Was this really a trap after all? Gauron talked as if he knew Sousuke would be here. In that case, what was he thinking being out in the open this way? Sousuke didn't know. The anxiety from earlier—that sensation before the attack began—came back to him. His scalp was itchy and his breathing was shallow. He couldn't calm down for anything. His supposedly keen sensitivity wouldn't work no matter how much he tried to force it.



This is bad. If this keeps up, it'll be horribly bad. Sousuke thought of the totaled Dark Bushnell, the image of the wreckage that overlapped his allies' M9s. *If I mess up . . . if I fail . . . if I'm defeated—there will be no recovering then.*

Sousuke's opponent was *the* Gauron. He had somehow escaped at Sunan, but here he was again to kill Sousuke's comrades. It was exactly like that time three years ago in Afghanistan.

"Urzu Seven!" called McAllen's voice over the radio.

Sousuke snapped back to reality after his response time had slowed down considerably.

"C'mon, how 'bout getting it together?"

Gauron fired the grenade launcher attached to the Gatling cannon. Small bombs rained down, creating a storm of destruction. Flames burst forth and disappeared like bubbles. Sousuke zigzagged his mech, somehow evading the grenades.

"Urzu Seven! What're you doing?"

McAllen, Mao, and Dunnigan fired their rifles with their retreated M9s. The shots of unparalleled accuracy attacked Venom, forty-millimeter armor-piercing rounds repeatedly pelting the head, torso, shoulders, and legs.



No, it *looked* like they hit. Every round burst into sparks just short of the mech. After a soft breeze blew, cracks etched down the building's wall. Venom was undamaged.

"So, that's that trick," Dunnigan growled.

"Affirmative. Don't get close to him," Sousuke replied, avoiding the side-sweeping Gatling cannon fire.

The enemy's firepower was tremendous, and Sousuke really couldn't get close. According to current data, the range at which the Arbalest could exhibit the effects of the Lambda Driver was at least one hundred feet. He had to somehow get that close and fire it off.

"Put everything into it and fire," Sousuke yelled.

"We can't approach from here. Shit!" cursed McAllen, hidden in the shadow of a storehouse that was practically ragged now. It was thanks to the M9's superior agility that he had managed to continually avoid such a dreadful firestorm. But if this kept up for long, none of the mechs would come through unharmed.

"Urzu Two to all positions. Try aiming at the weapon instead of the mech! At the Gatling cannon's magazine—ahh!"

"What's wrong?"

"I'm all right—minor damage. Hurry!"



Not even bothering to answer “roger,” McAllen and the others fired from the ground or while leaping about. The barrage riddled Venom’s right side. Nearly all the bullets were repelled by the force field, but . . .

“Heh heh heh, so useless, hmm?”

Suddenly, there was a flash, followed by an explosion. One bullet that shot off tempo from the others randomly struck the Gatling cannon’s magazine, inducing an explosion of the remaining ammo. Several hundred thirty-five-millimeter rounds exploded in a chain reaction, scattering destructive pieces of metal around the area.

The building was partially destroyed, wrapped in gigantic flames and black smoke. Gauron’s AS disappeared from view. It was unknown whether it was blown to bits or just blown away somewhere.

“Did that do it?”

“No.”

“Watch out!”

Bursting through the smoke, clothed in flames, Venom jumped out of the sky. Despite being within point-blank range of the explosion, the mech hardly was damaged at all.



"You're not bad, eh?"

Venom landed heavily and charged at full speed, kicking up concrete as though it were gravel. Its speed was equal to an M9—no, even greater than that.

"This guy's somethin' else."

"Twelve, keep back!" Sousuke advised, confronting the onrushing mech. Now was the time to use the Lambda Driver. Sousuke raised his shot cannon and aimed. The image of Venom positioned beyond the target box displayed on Sousuke's screen as it menacingly gripped large monofilament cutters in each hand.

"Kaaashiiim!" Gauron laughed. It was just like that instance four months ago.

I'll do this. . . . I should be able to. I've done it multiple times. Yes, I will succeed. This has to work. If it fails . . . Calm your mind, Sousuke urged himself. You have to. Concentrate mentally. Remember the image of the shell. The image is important. It's absolutely necessary.

Sousuke pulled the trigger. The shot cannon went off, and a fifty-seven-millimeter round was emitted. Thanks to his perfect aim, the winged-armor-piercing round flew, puncturing Gauron's AS. Or so he thought. The round merely had sparked and scattered in front



of Venom. Nothing had happened except for a gunshot. The Lambda Driver failed to function.

Sousuke was dumstruck.

Venom charged toward him, its hands grasping the large knives spread left and right, as if it were trying to embrace the Arbalest.

"Sousuke!" Before Gauron's knives could cut into the Arbalest's cockpit, an M9 rushed in from the side and thrust his mech aside. The two mechs fell, twisted together. The knives cut the air, barely missing the Arbalest.

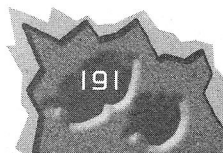
As Sousuke sat up his mech, he muttered, "Mao?"

"Get hold of yourself! Why are you just standing—"

That was all Mao got to say. Gauron halted suddenly, turned around, and thrust forward his right hand while pointing an index finger at the M9. "Bang!" he exclaimed.

The space between Venom's and Mao's mechs shimmered. Something ran in a straight line, and an unseen force grasped Mao's mech. There first was an unpleasant sound, and then—*choong!*—the scream of the metal frame rending echoed. The sound of gallons of liquid bursting out resounded.

The M9's neck had been severed from the internal shock. The head dragged along cables and pipes as it drooped onto the back like



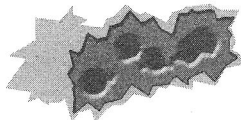


a *rokurokubi*. Shock fluid leaked out of the broken pipes, making a muddy puddle on the ground.

"Mao?"

There was no answer.

The M9 was crumpled limp and motionless in the Arbalest's arms. It didn't move at all.



There was no spare time to check on Mao's well-being. Gauron pointed his finger gun at the Arbalest. Intuitively sensing danger, Sousuke nimbly leapt back while holding the M9.

Gauron let out a low laugh. "Hey now, don't be scared. All I did was point a finger, right?"

Sousuke kept his eyes foward and set Mao's mech on the ground.

"Urzu Seven, what happened?"

McAllen's and Dunnigan's M9s went around both sides and fired their rifles at Gauron from a range of nearly one thousand feet. Gauron shrugged off their fire as if it were light rain and stooped down like he was conserving energy.



"Now, let's try that again." Gauron brandished the monofilament cutters over his head and rushed in once more.

Sousuke again jumped back. While firing his shot cannon, he called: "This is Urzu Seven. Two's down—status unknown. I'll draw Venom away. Someone take a look at her."

"What was that? Repeat!"

"Mao is down. Hurry and check on her!" Sousuke fired and fired, but Gauron was hot on his heels. All the cannon rounds were deflected, almost completely ineffective.

It's different than before! When Sousuke fought Gauron before, there seemed to be restrictions on his opponent's use of the Lambda Driver, too. It was different now, though; it was totally limitless. Not even surprise attacks worked. What was more, Sousuke was unable to use the equipment to counter it. No matter how much he concentrated, he couldn't use the Lambda Driver.

He panicked and couldn't make it work. When he couldn't make it work, he panicked. It was a vicious cycle.

A transmission caught his attention: "Sousuke, it's me."

"Kurz?"

"Lead Venom to the east side of the island. Return to building DI."



The rooftop of building DI was where Gauron had appeared a while ago.

"What're you going to do?" asked Sousuke.

"Just do it. And relax! Leave it to me."

"All right." Sousuke did as he was told, running his mech to the northeast building.

Kurz should have heard the news about Mao, but his voice was strangely relaxed and he seemed very composed. He wasn't one to underestimate during times like these. He was a man devoid of tension; he was frivolous and undeniably irritating to his colleague. Deep inside his mech, where no one could see him, that mask had been removed.

Gauron pursued the Arbalest. Their agility and speed were equal, so shaking him off was next to impossible.

"Don't be so unfriendly. How far are you gonna run?" taunted Gauron.

The building drew near. It was ten stories—about five or six times the height of an AS. But from the sixth floor up, it was partially destroyed from the exploding Gatling cannon.

"Good. Stop in front of the building," commanded Kurz. The Arbalest came to a stop on the building's east side near a wrecked



vehicle and concrete pieces strewn about the entrance, and then it turned to face its pursuer.

Sousuke noticed that spot was visible in a straight line from the sniping point where Kurz and Nguyen had been on standby. When he magnified his sensor, he could see far out at sea an M9 aiming a large rifle. Ahead of him, Gauron's AS bore down. Sousuke aimed at the red mech and shot his cannon, but everything bounced off.

"You disappoint me, Kashim. I thought maybe you'd gotten a little better at this!"

A knife glimmered. The shot cannon Gauron used as a shield was cut in two. After another flash, his shoulder armor was cut off. Sharp stabs attacked from left and right, but he resolutely sent his mech forward. Somehow, he managed to grab both the Arbalest's arms. An operator with only average skills probably would've died by this stage.

"You try so hard, but . . ." Gauron forced the Arbalest's hands until they held the knives inward. The Arbalest's electromagnetic muscles grated as Sousuke forced the knives back at full power. It was a contest of strength between the mechs. The enemy mech's power was fierce, however, and it had the weight advantage. The Arbalest fell back one step, two steps, until its back hit the wall of the building,



causing its frame to grind and moan. The cutting edges of the vibrating high-speed rotating monofilament cutters pressed toward the Arbalest's chest armor.

"Gah . . . !"

"C'mon, what's the matter? You gonna die? With your precious, precious girl," Gauron sneered.

"Urzu Seven, don't move."

The next instant, Gauron's mech was hit by something originating from a position that was directly perpendicular. Metal fragments spread about, and the mech's head slumped down. It was Kurz's sniper bullet from nearly two-and-a-half miles away. But not even a powerful seventy-six-millimeter round could penetrate the enemy's force field. Could it use the protective wall against a surprise attack from an extremely long range?

Such a vehement punch did make the red AS stagger a little, which was essential. In no time, Kurz fired his sniper cannon again: two shots . . . three . . . four . . . five. The successive rounds weren't aimed at Gauron, though. The partially collapsed building just behind them, including its supports and beams, were blown away one after another by the accurate shooting.



Having lost on the fifth floor what was barely supporting the upper half, the building gave way. Countless pieces of rebar tore, concrete collapsed, and glass shattered, creating a thunderous roar. Hurdling at a speed that shook the air, hundreds of tons of structure fell down from overhead directly toward the top of the Arbalest and its enemy.

Kurz didn't have time to send a warning. Sousuke sank his mech down and delivered a sharp foot sweep to Gauron. The red AS lost its balance and fell to its knees. Paying no further attention to the enemy, the Arbalest crouched and bounded away from that spot.

A second later, the crumbling building crashed to the ground, crushing the red AS. Following a roaring tremor, parts of the building scattered like small pieces of candy, as did walls, floors, pipes, and furniture. The dust was so thick that visibility was stark white.

"Sousuke, you alive?"

"For the moment."

The Arbalest, having thrown itself to the ground, stood up slowly.

Kurz really pushes the envelope, thought Sousuke. One wrong move and Sousuke would've been on his way to the afterlife, too. Having thought that, he also had to admit that Kurz's shooting technique



was close to miraculous. From two-and-a-half miles away, even a building's main supports became as thin as needles. For Kurz to hit more than four of them at once . . .

"That's some skill," Sousuke said.

"That's what I call *skill*." Somewhat belated, Dunnigan's M9 came running up. "Did that get 'im?"

"I don't know. Give me a gun and stay back."

The Arbalest took a forty-millimeter rifle from Dunnigan's M9. After checking remaining ammo, it pointed the rifle directly in front of itself and approached the mountain of rubble. Sousuke was not confident that Gauron was dead.

It's this much destructive force. No matter how strong the Lambda Driver's protective wall is, he probably suffered some damage, he thought. He did worry that Gauron could be under the rubble, waiting for a chance to spring in his direction. This time, he had to somehow use the Lambda Driver to bring down his enemy. *But can I use it?*

Sousuke's palms grew increasingly sweaty. He nearly jumped when there was an unexpected movement in the rubble pile. Slowly, a chunk of rebar and concrete rose up and then crumbled into pieces, revealing the red mech. It held no weapons, but both hands were up, and steam was pouring out from various joints as it stood up jerkily.



Without knowing his opponent's intentions, Sousuke hesitated to pull the trigger. He certainly wasn't negligent, but he wasn't confident that shooting would have any effect, either.

"You got me. Another overhear," said Gauron over the sound of leaking air. The mech's red body shivered a little and slowly separated in front and back. The hatch opened—which, done in front of the enemy, meant surrender for any AS pilot.

These mechs mimicked the human form, and because of the structure of their frame, they hardly could move when the torso was separated. From the look of it, Venom was no exception.

"The tables have turned from how they once were, hmm? I submit. Do what you will," Gauron said.

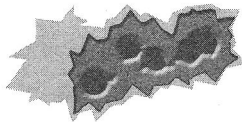
"Come down," responded Sousuke in a forced state of calm.

"You won't shoot? I'm sure you'll regret it." With that, the voice heard through the external speaker ceased.

Gauron appeared from within the opened torso in a dark red operator suit, a straight scar carved lengthwise into this forehead. There were burn marks on the scruff of his neck, and he looked considerably thinner than he had four months ago. There was no doubt who it was.



"So, what happens to me?" asked the terrorist, sporting a wearisome smile on his face.



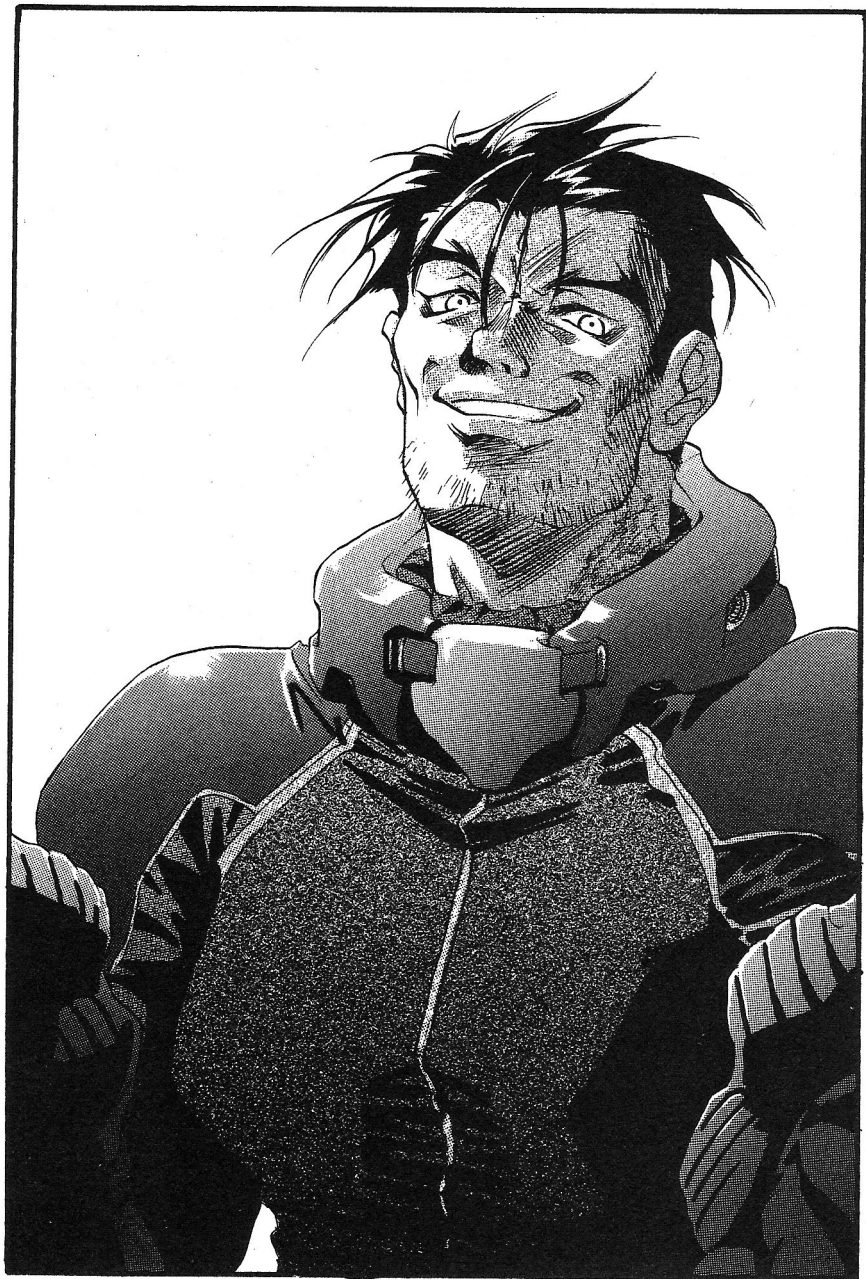
August 28, 04:40 (Local Time)

Perio Archipelago

Berildaobu Island

Less than thirty seconds after the combat with Gauron ended, transport helicopters from the Tuatha de Danaan flew in. Soldiers of the Primary Response Team (PRT) got out and deployed within the base. The M9s covered them from the rear. There were sporadic firefights with remaining enemy infantry, but no real casualties were forthcoming, and the suppression of the base was completed.

There were seventeen enemy prisoners. Out-of-work mercenaries from various combat hot spots composed the majority of this particular terrorist group. The American military personnel who were here originally also were rescued from lodgings in which they had been confined. There were forty-eight liberated hostages in total.





Typically, a larger number of soldiers were stationed here, but it was the summer holiday, so more than half of them were away from the base.

The good news was that Melissa Mao was alive. What Gauron's finger gun destroyed was a part attached to the mech's back, slightly above the cockpit block, so the pilot herself had not been injured. She seemed to have suffered a concussion from the impact, however, and was now unconscious.

The greatest reward of the engagement was the capture of Gauron and Venom nearly unscathed. If this man and mech were investigated, many things regarding the organization behind the scenes would come to light. Based on the results, the operation would have to be categorized under "huge success," but only in terms of the results.

Success was far from Sousuke's mind. He hadn't used the Arbalest's Lambda Driver, Mao's life was put in danger, and what actually had saved him was Kurz's quick wittedness and Gauron's mech troubles. In sum, he didn't contribute a thing. He was lucky, but that was about all he was.

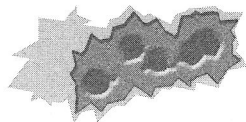
McAllen had said, "No worries. Good work."

Kurz had said, "Well, these things can happen."

Dunnigan and Nguyen ignored Sousuke altogether.

As it was right after suppression, the base was still engulfed in tumult. Sousuke's Arbalest was on the western side of the base, at the now bullet-riddled heliport. He was standing guard for the helicopters that had landed. Nearby were Mao's half-destroyed M9 and the red mech, Venom.

Sousuke surveyed a small transport helicopter. Near it were PRT soldiers, along with Lieutenant Commander Kalinin, Captain McAllen, and Gauron, who had both hands and feet bound securely.



"Hi, Ivan. How many years has it been?" Despite being faced with the big, burly Russian Ivan, who had an icy lack of expression, Gauron showed no sign of timidity.

Kalinin stared furiously at the terrorist. His eyes appeared bloodthirsty and were piercing enough to stab the heart of an ordinary person—maybe even kill them.

"What are you up to?" Kalinin asked after a short pause.

"Up to? What're you talking about?"



"Fine. I'll tell you now that I don't care to show you any mercy, nor will there be any kind of deal. Once we make you tell us everything, we'll eradicate you from this Earth. Remember that."

"Ohhh, scaaary."

Kalinin turned his back on the jeering Gauron and said to the nearby soldiers: "Take him away."

Pushed by PRT soldiers, Gauron was put on board the helicopter. Kalinin and Captain McAllen moved away from it as it started to take off.

"Withdraw within five minutes. I'll remain here as planned."

"Yes sir!"

Kalinin had work left to do with the American forces who would soon be there, including contact, negotiation over post-op measures, and trivial political matters. With the exception of a few subordinates, the other personnel and equipment—Arm Slaves, transport helicopters, and such—would withdraw quickly.

Gauron and Venom would be transferred to the de Danaan, and the other prisoners would be delivered to the U.S. military. Kalinin sincerely believed Gauron should be shot to death then and there, but Gauron's transfer was an order from operational headquarters.



The measure meant there probably would be a backlash from the Americans over losing the terrorist leader.

Kalinin mulled over dark thoughts as he walked with McAllen. *He obviously has some advantage in his grasp, no matter if it's nothing more than a lifeline.* Kalinin knew that Gauron never would engage in terrorist activity this reckless. He looked depraved and pleasure seeking, but regardless, he was a pro. He had to have some careful plan, ensuring his own safety, and with a feasible objective.

Gauron would not commit suicide. He considered his own life more important than Earth. That, at least, went without question. In light of that, the drama of occupying this base, the ridiculous demands, his overly quick surrender—everything about this situation was unnatural. Tessa's fears were warrantable. There was a chance that this terrorist action was a diversion to divert attention from Gauron's allies as they attempted to attack some other important facility.

Mithril's higher ups already had anticipated that, had strengthened their surveillance stance, and had issued a warning to security agencies in various nations. At this point, no such activity had been detected in any region. Even so, if the enemy had sufficiently prepared, they might as well be without the means to defend against it—just like at this base.



We always have to be the ones to react, thought Kalinin. That was Mithril's basic problem: They aimed for deterrent effect and dared to give the impression of being the strongest organization in the world, but everyone actually in the organization knew it was a lie.

It wasn't solely Mithril, however. Every single antiterrorist organization suffered from the same dilemma. The attacker always had the advantage in combat. Mithril's strong point was high-powered equipment and personnel, but that was all. The organization never could make any gains in quantity that exceeded its quality.

Mithril was an extremely powerful but extremely inadequate force for good. This was why the antiterrorist organization was named after mithril, the magic silver that appears in J.R.R. Tolkien's literary works.

"Regarding Venom, rely on Colonel Testarossa's instructions. I leave the handling of that man Guaron to you," said Kalinin.

"Yes sir," McAllen responded.

"Have two guards watch him at all times. Personnel selection is up to you. Once his physical exam is finished, bind him securely. Under no circumstances do you remove his straightjacket or handcuffs. Keep him completely isolated until the medical inspection

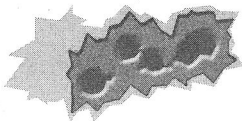


is complete. Until we know he's clean, you can ignore all other hygienic concerns."

McAllen grinned broadly. "Even if he suddenly becomes ill?" He was talking about feigned illness, of course.

"Correct. I don't care if he dies as a result. There's no need to allow him any dignity. I want you to treat him like a highly intelligent wild animal."

"Yes sir. Will do." McAllen saluted before running over to his M9.



Mithril transport helicopters with mechs suspended from their undersides—and smaller ones for personnel—enabled ECS while in the air and disappeared into the morning sun. Smoke continued to rise from various places around the base—and the barracks, communications center, administrative building, and hangar were riddled with holes.

Kurama crawled out from under the wreckage of the Dark Bushnell left on the beach. *There's probably no reason to hide any longer*, he decided.



"Hmph." He gazed at the traces of the vanished helicopters that created bands of light purple, snorting a bit through his round nose. Gauron had gone. Now, things depended on his luck. And even from Kurama's viewpoint, there were things about a man's bad luck that were hard to take lightly.

What nullified all his bad luck was his disease, pancreatic cancer. His death was fated, so he was no longer afraid of anything. According to Kurama's diagnosis, he had a fifty-fifty chance of success—not a safe bet either way.

Kurama took out his satellite communication module, opened the antenna, and skillfully operated the panel. Soon, an exclusive encrypted channel opened. "Yes?" answered the voice on the other end of the radio, which sounded like a sleepy boy.

"It's me."

"Ah, Kurama. How'd it go?" The sound of hair being combed and a faint rustling of clothes could be heard over the radio. A young woman's nasally, saccharine voice was audible farther in the background.

"Gauron was taken away to the Toy Box."

"Hmm, I win the bet then. Three leviathans and five dollars from Mr. Gold. Next time I see Gauron, I'd better treat him to dinner or something."



"Do you think you'll see him again?"

"I'd like to hope so," his counterpart said, yawning a little. "I spent three days making that special program, after all. And I asked Mr. Zinc to set the table. Well, I got to teach my failure of a little sister a lesson."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah. In any case, it should at least do for a greeting. I'll wait for good news, but I won't hold my breath. So, you'll be coming back now, yes?"

"Yes," answered Kurama.

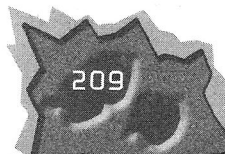
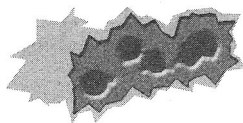
"Take care then."

"Thank you very much."

After the transmission ended, Kurama folded up the satellite communicator and hurled it into the sea. He checked his clothes: a typical American military uniform reflecting his rank as corporal. His name tag read "J. Locke," and he also had an ID card.

Suddenly, at least a dozen American military helicopters approached from the northern sky.

Now then, pondered Kurama, which one should I ride home?





August 27, 20:15 (Greenwich Mean Time)

Tuatha de Danaan, Main Hangar

When all the helicopters landed on the storage deck, the submarine's hull shuddered, and the flight hatch slowly closed. Each AS detached from its helicopter, walked over to its housing spot, and knelt down. The helicopters cut their engines, and their rotors folded and retracted. Deck crew and maintenance troops busily ran about the hangar, setting up stabilizing machinery and retrieving ammunition.

Kaname was standing at the hangar entrance, fidgeting. The men who participated in the battle passed beside her. Many of them seemed exhausted, but at the same time they appeared relieved. Some of them winked at her.

Maybe everyone came through all right, Kaname thought right before she saw Mao being carried up on a stretcher, apparently injured.

When Kaname voiced her concern, the sub's medic Ms. Peggy, who was standing nearby, said, "She'll be okay. She just got a bit shaken up."

Kaname watched Mao being whisked off on a stretcher to the infirmary. When she turned around, Sousuke was standing there,



evidently seeing Mao off, too. Kaname was relieved that he looked unharmed.

"Sousuke?" Kaname immediately sensed that he was despondent. He had the same sullen face and pursed mouth as always, but his eyes were wandering across the floor. His demeanor lacked any spirit whatsoever.

"Um, welcome back."

Without answering, Sousuke sat down on a nearby stationary electric tractor. He barely seemed to notice Kaname. She was here because she wanted to make sure he was okay, but apparently, he didn't realize that.

An alarm sounded throughout the ship, and an artificial voice announced, "Diving, diving." The floor lurched a bit and shuddered, causing silence to fall over the deserted hangar.

"Y-you aren't going back to the ready room?" asked Kaname.

"No."

"What's going on?"

"I messed up. I can't face my people," he said bluntly as he started to remove his operator suit. After removing the gypsum head protector for guarding against shocks and the thin body armor, he undid his chest zipper. He kept the bottom half on,



ried the sleeves together at his waist, and wore a tank top on his upper half.

"Did . . . someone die?"

"No."

"That's good. Mao didn't seem to be too bad off, either."

"You say that so nonchalantly," Sousuke said, strengthening his tone.

"Nonchalantly? I d-didn't mean to sound that way," Kaname stammered.

"She was one step away from death—because of me and that AS."

"Eh?"

Sousuke turned the other way and starting droning on like a dam that had burst. "I wasn't able to use the Lambda Driver. 'Amplify your mind' and 'envision'? I don't get it. I'm fed up with it. That sketchy, unpredictable thing is no weapon—it's hocus-pocus. Let a magician pilot it. I—"

He glared at the Arbalest stationed on the other side of the hangar. "I can't stand that mech. I *really* can't stand it. It betrays its operator at critical moments. It's no tool for a pro to use. The guy who made it was a terrible engineer."

This was the first time Sousuke had grumbled so many complaints, which surprised Kaname. As she squeezed the hem of her



apron, she said in a composed voice, "Hey, why not rest a bit? I'm sure you're tired."

"I'm not tired."

"But I don't think you're acting like yourself." Kaname felt it deep in her heart: This wasn't like Sousuke. She didn't know what had happened, but here he was mumbling on about his grievances. The usual Sousuke was more earnest and would never criticize people or things around him.

"What do *you* know about me?" sneered Sousuke in a tone that sounded as though he were stifling the urge to shout.

"Uh . . ."

"Don't throw around the word 'like' so freely. Do you understand what's been forced on me? I'm just a mercenary. I'd rather be embarking on normal missions with normal equipment. But ever since that incident four months ago, I've been continually jinxed. Gauron, that AS, guarding you . . . I'm not cut out for any of these things. It's nothing but a bunch of burdens."

"N—" Kaname felt as if the back of her head had been struck. *Burdens—including guarding me. So, that's how he's felt about it.*

"I-I never . . ." Kaname struggled. "I don't remember ever asking you to do it. Don't make that . . . that annoyed face. If you feel that way, w-why not just quit?"



"I can't. It's a mission only I can do."

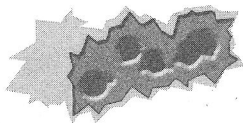
"What the hell? Mission? You know, you . . ."

Sousuke gazed at Kaname with eyes that were gloomy, indifferent, and desolate all at the same time. "I'd say you're the one who's tired."

"I'm not. In spite of all this, I was worried about you. And you—"

"All right, I understand. Go back to your room."

Kaname said nothing more. She turned around, passing by Kurz and another Asian team member at the exit without bothering to greet them, and she continued feebly walking down the corridor.



Sousuke glared at the floor gloomily long after Kaname left. Gauron was still alive and was on board this ship. Full of anxiety and regret remembering the Arbalest, Mao, and the Lambda Driver, Sousuke couldn't see anything positive in the outcome. His head felt jumbled and heavy.

"Sousuke," said Kurz, who suddenly appeared beside him with Corporal Yang standing at his rear.



"Kur—"

Kurz's fist sank into Sousuke's left cheek. Stunned by the surprise attack, Sousuke tumbled off the electric trailer and struck the floor. His mouth was slippery with the taste of blood and seemed to be cut.

Reeling, Sousuke looked up. Kurz was about to hit him again, but Yang was trying hard to stop him. "Cut it out, Kurz!"

"Shut up!" Kurz and Yang struggled violently.

Sousuke wiped blood from the corner of his mouth and said, "What's the big idea?"

"So sorry, but I overheard. And y'know, I just couldn't stomach you acting like a hero. That's all!"

"Acting like a hero? Was I—"

"Shut up. Just because you couldn't be the big shot, you sulk like a kid and go and take it out on a girl. Guys like you turn into abusive husbands or the neighborhood nuisance. You hear what I'm saying?"

"I didn't take anything out on her!"

"Yes you did, asshole! D'you *always* make nice girls like her cry? You're a piece of shit. Maybe you'll learn something in hell!"

Kaname, crying? When? Why? Sousuke tried to sort it out in his mind. Perhaps because his field of vision had become extremely narrow, the reality finally registered for the first time. *I did? I made her . . . ?*



Pacified by Yang, Kurz regained his composure. After taking a deep breath, he averted his eyes from Sousuke.

"There's things on your mind—I get that," Kurz said curtly. "Look, I ain't mad about anything that happened during the operation. That Arbalest is a screwy AS in the first place. It was predictable that something like that would happen, so that's why Mao, McAllen, me, and the others were there. We captured Venom, and we also recaptured the base. All in a day's work. Am I wrong?"

"But Mao's—"

"Don't start in on that now. Things like that can happen at any time. You're no first-timer, you should know that!"

Sousuke was at a loss for words.

"You think you're fighting alone? Don't play the hero like that," Kurz said over his shoulder as he left the hangar.

Left behind, Yang put his hands on his hips and sighed deeply. "Sousuke, you okay?"

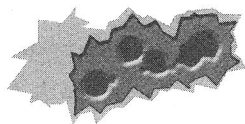
"Yeah. . . ."

"Earlier, Kurz said you looked depressed, so he thought he'd come mess with you. He probably was trying to cheer you up in his own way. So, we ended up hearing you talk to Kaname, and then . . ."



"All right," Sousuke answered and stood up. He wiped the corner of his mouth once more. *The taste of blood. Pain. I know these sensations well, so why do they feel so unusual now? Maybe this is the first time I've ever been hit by someone this way.*

His mood was far from turning around.



August 28, 01:15 (Greenwich Mean Time)

Tuatha de Danaan, Central Command Center

The ship submerged to a depth of nearly nine hundred feet, and it headed north-northeast at thirty knots.

Beneath the ocean level that obstructs sound waves—the thermal layer—lurked a U.S. Navy submarine. Its inhabitants were aware that the de Danaan had entered the waters near Berildaobu Island. They apparently wanted to collect sound signature data on the de Danaan, which they called the Toy Box, while they had the chance. A sub-spotting plane, antisub helicopter, and frigate also stood out.



Tessa used the ship's SCD and EMFC freely, skillfully slipping through the encircling net. It was the usual game, free of problems. She looked at the onscreen sea chart. According to the weather division's report, a low-pressure system was approaching this region from the west, and there would be a heavy storm on the surface the following day. It was a good trend. Now, the U.S. forces would be unable to use antisub helicopters and would probably give up their detection efforts. If things went well, the *de Danaan* would be able to return to the Merida Island base by the next evening.

Tessa wanted to go check on Mao and talk to Sousuke about various things, but naturally, there was still no time to spare for that. She could by no means leave the command center, and she had to keep an eye out for the slightest emergency. The prisoner Gauron was on her mind, as well. To think he was alive, and that he'd shown up with a new Lambda Driver-loaded mech.

Kalinin, who was left behind on Berildaobu Island, had expressed earnestly over the radio the need to be highly suspicious of Gauron—that he was still planning something. Tessa had a bad feeling ever since the base's occupation was lifted, but it was getting increasingly worse, to the extent that it seemed like a stench was wafting from briefing room number one, where Gauron was being confined.



All in all, Sousuke and the others had done well. It was a godsend that Venom had been seized undamaged. *Maybe that's to be expected of our Mr. Sagara*, thought Tessa. She was busy running the ship and had not yet asked about details regarding Venom's capture, and her heart was secretly leaping.

"Captain?" The engineering officer Ensign Lemming entered the command center. She had been ordered to do a preliminary investigation of Venom.

"How did it go?" asked Tessa.

"Well, ma'am, I haven't disassembled it, but its Lambda Driver configuration is basically the same as the ARX-7's, although the details seem very different. What is certain is that the system is almost the same as the Behemoth's."

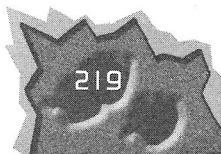
"Ah."

"There's something that concerns me more than that: That AS—I was told he surrendered because it overheated, but I . . ."

"What is it?"

"Nothing appears to be broken. The armor has a bit of wear on it, and a shoulder ECS lens is damaged, but . . ."

When she heard that, Tessa instantly imagined a scene wherein the red AS thrashed about the hangar. "I don't suppose there's any danger of it suddenly coming to life?"





Lemming gave an accomplished smile. "There is none. I've disconnected the generator's connector. No matter what program is prepared in the mech's AI, it will not move without power. There was also a self-destruct mechanism, but so long as no one touches it, it will never activate."

"Good to hear."

In that case, why wasn't the AS broken down? Why had Gauron willingly surrendered when he could've kept fighting? What if he did it intentionally? The thought was ridiculous. He had undergone a thorough bodily examination and could not be bound any more securely, and he was under guard of SRT members. His inspection results came back clean, so there was hardly any chance he was carrying a virus. There was no way for the terrorist to escape and play some trick. *But still . . .*

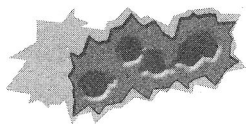
"Anyway, well done. We'll dismantle Venom at the base," Tessa said.

"Aye, captain." After saluting, Ensign Lemming left the command center.

"Mr. Mardukas?" Tessa called to her nearby XO.

"Yes, captain."

"There is something we need to discuss."



August 28, 01:10 (Greenwich Mean Time)

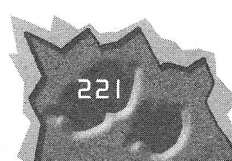
Western Pacific Ocean

American Navy Submarine Pasadena

The order from fleet headquarters—the first in some time—read: “Within the next twelve hours, the Toy Box might pass near your current sector, so keep quiet. Should you locate it, tail it as best you can and gather data.”

The captain of the USS Pasadena, Commander Killy B. Sailor, crushed the printout containing the order in his hands and let out a displeased growl. “How the hell are we supposed to find it? Damn it!” The question was especially pressing considering they had lost it at such close range. The ocean sector Sailor was in charge of had a radius of sixty-two miles, which made it like finding a needle in a haystack.

“Chances are, headquarters isn’t hoping for much,” said Executive Officer Takenaka in an easygoing voice. The other ships in the Pacific





fleet apparently had been dispatched farther south to hunt for Toy Box. The Pasadena alone was in this distant sector.

"I guess not. When I think of this task, it reminds me of Nobby," Sailor said.

"Who might that be?"

"When I was a kid, I was in charge of a boys' baseball team."

"Ahh."

"We were called the Oklahoma Sailors. Anyway, one of the guys was this hopeless sort named Nobby. Yours truly put him in right field and eighth in batting order, and I totally gave him the cold shoulder. If he made an error, I made him pull his underwear down in front of Kathy."

"Kathy?"

Sailor had a distant look in his eyes. "Looking back on it now, I think I understand a little how Nobby felt out there in the cold in right field."

"That didn't amount to much, considering how long it took to say it."

"Come again? Are you making fun of my precious boyhood memories?"

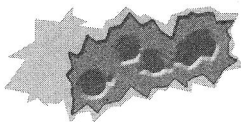
"I mean, they're only the musings of a backwoods neighborhood bully."



“Damn it!”

For the next three minutes, Sailor and Takenaka had an abusive verbal exchange. The deck officer got in between them and pleaded, “Please, enough,” after which Sailor and Takenaka panted for breath. After a one-minute rest and a five-minute argument, the ship was halted at the thermal layer boundary in order to lay in wait for Toy Box—the Toy Box they never would be able to find.

The next twelve hours would be a boring job in which the most exciting thing was picking one’s nose. Or at least, it was supposed to be that way. . . .



August 28, 04:31 (Greenwich Mean Time)

Tuatha de Danaan, Galley

There was just about the right amount of space in between the new microwave and oven. It was a dim space, about as wide as a person’s shoulders, and it was a most inviting space in which to huddle and enclose yourself in your own private shell.



Kaname squatted in the narrow space, flooded with melancholy. She hugged her knees, her dark eyes downcast, and her whole body in a state of depression. Her head was filled with thoughts of Sousuke, causing her to feel angry, disappointed, and hopelessly sad. As her thoughts became increasingly jumbled, her eyes grew steadily blearier. It occurred to her that she was being pathetic, and it made her head hot once again.

Tomorrow, I'll ask Tessa to release Sousuke from guard duty, Kaname plotted. Someone else would replace him, or else the duty itself would be discontinued. Either one worked; it didn't matter. Kaname didn't want him near her if he were going to look that annoyed. She didn't want to feel like baggage anymore, period.

The cook, Seaman Hiroshi Kasuya, was good enough to leave her alone. A few hours earlier, Sousuke had come by the mess hall and asked Kasuya if he'd seen Kaname, but Kasuya had tactfully answered that she wasn't there. It felt strange to hear him conversing in English when he was Japanese, too.

When she grew tired, Kaname dozed off on the spot. After awaking from a shallow dream, her thoughts again started whirling. She'd grow tired from another emotional surge, fall asleep, and repeat it all over again.



Perhaps unable to remain indifferent, Kasuya finally spoke to her. He placed a bookmark in the book on oceanography he'd started to read and said, "Hey, listen, Kaname. I don't mind if you're there, but why don't you eat a little?"

"No thanks," Kaname replied.

"If you're going to sleep later, it'd be best to go back to the captain's quarters."

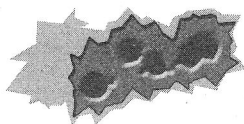
"I don't want to go back." It would be terribly troublesome to face a certain someone, after all.

"Don't be like that. Take a shower or something, get some good sleep, and I bet you'll feel better."

Kaname regarded Kasuya curiously. "Do I annoy you?"

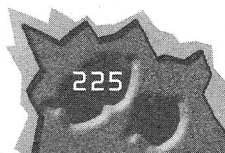
"Uh, no, it's nothing like that," he replied with a troubled smile.

It seemed as though Kaname had become baggage here, too. With nothing else to do, she stood up and sluggishly left the galley.



The Same Time

Tuatha de Danaan, Briefing Room One





Terrorist watch was being carried out in quick one-hour shifts. The de Danaan had no such facilities as isolation cells because there was rare need for them and limited space inside the ship. On the rare occasions that prisoners or guests were on board, open rooms were used. In this case, briefing room number one, used for everyday briefings, was used as a makeshift prison.

Private Lian, part of the PRT, was on second shift guard duty. He sat near the room's entrance with Sergeant Dunnigan of the SRT, observing the terrorist; that was the primary duty of his job. The terrorist in question—Lian didn't know his name—wore a straightjacket and a mouth gag, and he was firmly attached to a chair with chains and handcuffs. His artificial leg had been removed, and the rest of his equipment was stored in another room. No matter what he might do, it would be nearly impossible for him to escape from this confinement.

Not ten minutes had passed since the shift change, but Lian was so bored that he began suffering from a yawning fit. Although he tried to stifle any evidence of lethargy, Sergeant Dunnigan shot a glare in his direction.

"Excuse me," Lian said, covering his mouth.



"Don't look like you're cut out to be a sniper," taunted Sergeant Dunningan.

Standing by in the same position for hours—that was the kind of fortitude that was an absolute necessity for a sniper. Lian had just been told he didn't have it.

Dunnigan was a large, muscular man with a round head, a buzz cut, and a thick scar next to his right eye. He always came off as moody and had hardly ever talked with Lian, either.

Lian snorted and said, "Sure, but, the Shanghai Acrobatic Theater couldn't possibly escape from this situation. I mean—"

"Our job's to be prepared for every possible danger. Don't forget that."

"Danger. Okay, what kinds of dangers are there?"

A crease crept across Dunnigan's forehead. Acting as though he were giving it careful consideration, he checked his wristwatch, glanced at the terrorist, and said, "Let's see . . . how's about this kind, for instance?" As he spoke, Dunnigan removed a cylindrical silencer from his pocket and screwed it onto his automatic pistol.

Lian followed Dunnigan's movements closely.

"This is just hypothetical. If I did this, what would you do?" He pointed the pistol at Lian.



Startled, Lian exclaimed, "Wh-what's the deal? That was sneaky!"

"It wasn't sneaky. This is one of those dangers, so don't let your guard down." Dunnigan's blue eyes peered straight at Lian. His face was very serious, like a teacher conveying a harsh lesson.

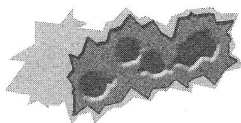
The gun still pointed at him, the private swallowed and nodded a little. "I-I'm sorry, sir. *Sergeant*, sir."

Dunnigan smiled broadly. "S'long as we see eye to eye."

Lian breathed a sigh of relief.

The sergeant smirked and added, "Looks like it's a little late, though." A second later, he pulled the trigger.

The bullet hit Private Lian directly in the head, and he died instantly. Both the gunshot and death were very quiet.



The chains, handcuffs, straightjacket, and gag were removed, and Gauron finally felt like himself again. He stretched his joints that had stiffened from being restrained for so long, rolling his head around. Because his artificial leg was missing, he stayed seated in the chair.



"Whew. I thought I might be left like that," Gauron said with great satisfaction.

Dunnigan made a grim face. "I did consider it, but this operation made up my mind. This place is no good. It's a joke—a bunch of babies."

"Is it?" asked Gauron, who had only just met Dunnigan for the first time.

It was only recently that a spy his organization had planted in Mithril's upper echelons—Mr. Zinc—had become active. The man who freed Gauron was one of the members Mr. Zinc had won over. It seemed that Mithril had a number of people with high morals, and selecting members who could be turned was terribly difficult and risky, but that wasn't Gauron's concern. His job was to take this ship in its entirety, or else to destroy it.

"In any case, welcome to Amalgam, Mr., um . . ."

"Dunnigan. John Dunnigan."

"Put 'er there, John," Gauron said as he presented his right hand.

Ignoring Gauron's gesture, Dunnigan said forcefully, "Back off, Chinaman. Not everyone gets to call me 'John.'"

"Aha . . ."



"Our relationship's just a business one. Don't forget that."

Gaaron drew back his hand and scratched his temple. Then, as if watching his counterpart's reaction, he said, "So, that also means, 'I don't take orders from the likes of you'?"

"Hmph. You catch on quick, Chi—"

The next instant, without even getting out of the chair, Gaaron suddenly yanked on Dunnigan's wrist. He twisted Dunnigan's wrist farther, turned it, pushed it back, pulled, and like magic, Dunnigan's large frame rose in midair, did a half turn, and crashed to the floor. Gaaron sat down on his fallen and rather speechless opponent. At some point, the knife hidden in Dunnigan's hand had transferred to Gaaron's hand.

"My my. Maybe you weren't ready, Johhhnnn?" Gaaron thrust the knife at his opponent's neck and added, "By the way, what I did a moment ago was jujitsu from my homeland, Japan. Johhhnnn."

"Son . . . of . . ."

"'Back off'? 'Won't take orders'? That's gonna be a problem, Johhhnnn." Gaaron slowly dragged the sharp edge against Dunnigan's skin.

"Ugh . . . ah . . . ah . . .!"

"So, Johhhnnn, business or not, you show respect to those who've worked somewhere longer than you. Understand, Joohhhnnn?"



The cold pain shook Dunnigan's body, and multiple beads of sweat appeared all over it. Unable to bear any more pain, he muttered, "A-all right. Sorry, sorry . . ."

"Is that how you really feel?"

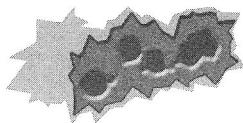
"I do. I won't cause any more trouble for you."

"Good. Let's shake and make up."

With the knife still in the cut, Gauron extended his right hand. Still facedown, Dunnigan nervously clenched it.

"Now, where would my *leg* be?" asked Gauron. "If I don't have the disc that's inside it, we can't do a thing."

"It's been brought in. Inside there," Dunnigan said pointing to an olive bag beneath the chair he'd been sitting in.



Gauron put on the deceased Private Lian's field uniform, stole a submachine gun, and left briefing room number one. It already was late night, so lights were low and hardly anyone was around.

Dunnigan led the way down the corridor and to the stairs leading to the upper deck. "The command center's above here. Captain's there, too."



"Alrighty," Guaron replied.

When he set foot on the stairs, there was a voice from behind.

"Where do you think you're going?"

When Gaaron and Dunnigan turned around, the man already had his pistol raised. He was a short Caucasian officer. Only his upper half was visible from around the corner, his pistol aimed squarely in their direction.

"Ah, Captain McAllen. You see, this here—"

"Shut up, Dunnigan," McAllen interrupted him flatly. "To think that it's come to this. Had the lieutenant commander not said to watch out for traitors, I probably wouldn't have happened along here. But to think it was you, an SRT member."

At that point, Dunnigan stopped trying to justify his actions, instead cracking a smile full of sarcasm. He shrugged calmly and laughed, saying, "I've never been able to stand that little girl. Ever."

"We'll discuss that later. Both of you drop your guns."

The corner of Gaaron's mouth raised. "What if we say 'no'?"

"You'll be dead." McAllen was skillfully hiding his left half behind the corner of the corridor. His skill with the gun was probably top notch, too. In the event that they fought back, it was almost certain they both would be instantly shot to death.



Suddenly, another team member—a Southeast Asian in a field uniform—appeared from the opposite side of the corner.

“Nguyen?” McAllen said.

“Captain, what is this?”

“What it looks like: Dunnigan’s betrayed us. Call Weber and the others,” McAllen ordered, never wavering his aim.

Nguyen surveyed all the men present and retrieved a small automatic pistol from his own pocket. It was a nine-millimeter gun with a silencer. With a *silencer* . . .

“What’s the matter, Nguyen? Hurry and—”

“I’m sorry, captain.” Nguyen pointed the barrel at McAllen and squeezed the trigger, releasing three shots in succession. All the rounds barreled into McAllen’s chest, spattering fresh blood.

Captain McAllen collapsed on the spot like a puppet with its strings cut. No scream, exclamation, or curse was uttered.

“Nice shot!” Gauron said with a hum. “So, you’re the other collaborator?”

Nguyen nodded and said, “That’s how it turns out. I’m Nguyen Bien Bo. Would what I did just now count as a bonus?”

“Ha. Sure, we’ll negotiate that.”



"If we could, Mr. Gauron." Nguyen made the "okay" sign with his fingers.

All of a sudden, there was a faint sound. The three men with finely honed senses all looked toward the sound simultaneously. There was a girl wearing civilian clothes standing beyond the fallen McAllen. Her ensemble comprised a light green parka and yellow shorts that were not befitting of this warship at all. Her long black hair swayed in the dim illumination.

She noticed the puddle of blood at her feet and slowly gazed at Gauron and the others. She had fine, beautiful features that were now stiffened in bewilderment. Her lips trembling a little, she appeared not to understand what was happening or what kind of situation she had walked into.

When she realized what was happening, she tried to run away, but Nguyen sprung at her. The frightened girl was no match for the trained soldier and his agile running ability. He grabbed her from behind and pressed a black combat knife against her chest.

"Aieeee!" she screamed.

"Go ahead and shout, girl. But if you do . . ." Nguyen whispered in the girl's ear and pressed the knife against her breast through her clothes. "It'll be all sorts of pain, and boys won't find you very attractive anymore."



The girl barely managed to keep silent.

"That's the captain's guest, you know. Let's get rid of her," said Dunnigan, shaking his head with a threatening expression.

"No way."

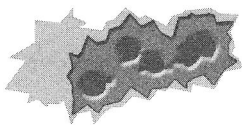
"Why not?"

"There are reasons. We do everything we can *not* to kill her. Everything we *can*, mind you."

Gauron looked at the girl's face, which was being held up by Nguyen.

She caught her breath, and in spite of her blurry vision, she fully mobilized her courage and glared intensely at Gauron. It took all her might not to look away.

"We never keep in touch, Kaname. How's everyone at school?"



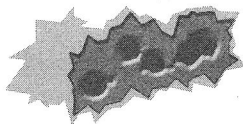
This is like a horror movie, thought Kaname. Here's a terrorist who was supposed to have been killed by Sousuke in the mountains of North Korea. He was still alive, and had now suddenly showed up on this ship. *This ship*, that guys like him were never supposed to be able to get near. *What the heck's going on, and how?* she thought, but there was no



way for her to understand now. All that was certain was that she was in another pinch—and this time, it was quite bad.

This guy Gauron and his two underlings were live wires. They were in a different league than Takuma's terrorist buddies she'd encountered two months ago. The way they walked and carried themselves, the quiet blood thirst permeating their bodies—all of it evoked the sense of unapproachable violence. They probably all were pros who would kill a person as easily as they breathed. Even Kaname, the amateur, keenly picked up on that. *They're probably stronger than Sousuke*, she thought somewhat randomly.

The men took Kaname with them and advanced down the deserted corridor. The giant with the round head went first, followed by Gauron and Kaname, and lastly walked the skinny knife-wielder. They went up the steps, through several doors, and exited the Tuatha de Danaan's core, the central command center.



Tessa had been sitting in her captain's chair, scanning the combat report from Berildaobu Island. The command center, constructed like a small theater, had a mere nine crewmen on duty; nearly half



the seats were empty. Executive Officer Mardukas also was not present.

The crewman in the seat closest to the door noticed the visitors first. As he began to stand up, Dunnigan's fist hit the bridge of the man's nose, and he was knocked the other way off his seat. Hearing the scream and noise, the remaining crew simultaneously focused their attention near the entrance. One beat later, Tessa also looked toward the altercation.

She saw SRT Sergeant Dunnigan, Kaname Chidori held up by Corporal Nguyen, and Gauron holding a submachine gun. Tessa felt a full-body, hair-raising chill. By simply witnessing those four, she knew who'd betrayed her and what was happening.

Nearly all the crew members present got out of their seats. Just as they were on the verge of lunging at Gauron and the others, Tessa shouted, "Don't!"

The crew froze.

"Under no circumstances. That is an order!"

The crew probably thought they somehow could subdue the group even if two or three died trying, but Tessa knew the combat power of SRT personnel all too well. Sousuke, Mao, Kurz, McAllen, Yang—they all were good people, but at the same time, the possessors



of superhuman killing techniques. Dunnigan and Nguyen were no exception. Those two probably could kill everyone here barehanded.

It had been decided that no crew would carry weapons on the ship unless needed. Bringing guns or edged weapons into the command center in particular was strictly prohibited. In actuality, Tessa herself broke that rule, and was secretly concealing an automatic pistol, but against these three, a gun would be of no use.

"That's a captain for you. She knows the situation," said Gauron in a carefree voice. He pointed his gun at Tessa and said, "Did everyone hear her? It's best if you don't try anything funny—like sounding an alarm. If you do something like that, something terrible will happen to your sweet, sweet captain. As for *how* terrible, it'll be rated X, something that minors won't be allowed to see. Got it?"

The crew slowly returned to their seats, their expressions steely.

"Go ahead and try it. None of you will leave this ship alive," Tessa asserted challengingly.

As if her forcefulness pleased him from the bottom of his heart, Gauron said, "Ohhh, she's cute! What a great place to work. You guys sure you haven't thrown a good thing away?" He glanced at Dunnigan and Nguyen, and then he smiled bitterly.

"Ain't no concern of ours," replied Dunnigan.



"It's not like we'd get to do anything," added Nguyen.

"Aha. By the way, you go over there, Kana. You two are valuable hostages." Gauron pulled Kaname's arm and stood her near Tessa.

"Kaname, are you injured?" asked Tessa.

"No, but one soldier was . . . uh . . ." Kaname went pale and stopped talking. *He probably was killed. Who was he?*

Tessa felt bitter pain in her chest, but one way or another, she drove it from her mind.

"Now, let's get down to business. Captain, set your heading northwest to . . . yes, three-zero-zero, let's say."

"I refuse," Tessa replied firmly.

"Hmm. Even after this?" Gauron pointed his submachine gun at the closest crewman.

"Stop it!" Kaname shouted.

Lieutenant Goddard, the crewman with the gun pointed at him, retained his stern expression and swallowed as if he'd readied himself for something. He looked straight at Tessa and said, "You must not do it, captain."

Tessa fell silent.

"I won't blame you. Neither will anyone else. Please . . ."

"Then, you get to die," Gauron declared.



Just before he pulled the trigger, Tessa interrupted. "Wait." She was unable to bear it. It was too much.

Gauron's finger stopped. "Oh? Didn't you refuse? Hmm hmm hmm." The terrorist nodded repeatedly as though he were thoroughly enjoying his opponent giving in.

"Helm to port, heading three-zero-zero," she murmured frailly.

"Captain!"

"It is not an issue, only a simple change of heading. Didn't you hear me? Helm to port, heading three-zero-zero!"

The deck officer nodded feebly and repeated it, and the two helmsmen redirected the ship. The *de Danaan*, which had been heading due north, began to circle its bow slowly to the northwest.

This is still tolerable, Tessa told herself.

But diving to maximum depth, shooting a crewman, or messing with the output of the palladium reactor—if any such dangerous demands were made, all she really could do was refuse—even if everyone present would be killed. All she could do was buy time. Soon, the crew outside the command center would notice the problem, if they hadn't already, and the situation would change. The enemy was likely limited to these three. As long as Mardukas and McAllen used their wits, something would work out.



Leaving Lieutenant Commander Kalinin on the island was a severe mistake. It would be so reassuring if he were on this ship, pondered Tessa regretfully.

"Maybe you're thinking that so long as you buy time, something will work out?" proposed Gauron.

Tessa refused to respond.

"What just happened was merely entertainment, actually. I also have this for you, if you don't do what I say. Hmm hmm hmm." Revealing a square disc, Gauron surveyed the personal screen at the captain's chair and attached a computer module. It was one of the few terminals directly connected to the mother AI Dana, the shipwide integrated control system.

No way, Tessa shuddered when she thought of the possibility.

After confirming the throttle, Gauron inserted the disc. "Hmm... this and . . . this. This is tough to follow, damn it!" He moved the onscreen cursor with the trackball and typed on the keyboard. "And... there."

After Gauron pressed "Enter," a window was displayed. The data on the disc was quickly transferred to the terminal: "Preparing COC\time remaining 00:00:05." It continued to display: "Warning\ Implementation of COC requires authorization of Captain T. TeA?ttarossa or %i? of dx%. headquarters. VerR?I? input of passwoA?a?O D%.i?d?μ?U? • ?WarnB%.e!!!!!!"



The screen blacked out, and the screen at the front of the command center suddenly went dark, too.

"No . . . no . . ." Tessa went pale, and it was all she could do to mumble.

Kaname and the crew didn't know what had happened, and they gazed at Tessa anxiously. Their questions were answered by the characters on the restored screen: "Welcome, Captain Gauron\Awaiting your orders\You may issue any order."

Gauron whistled and placed his hand on Tessa's shoulder. "See that? Machines are so heartless."

"COC" stood for *change of command*. The ship captain record had been updated; normally no one but Tessa could do this, through only one window, using an inserted disc. In addition, the de Danaan's programming language, BAda, only could be used well by a small number of people.

Tessa could think of no more than one person capable of this feat. "It's him? Do you . . . know him?"

"Hmm hmm hmm, that's right. He said to tell you 'hi,' but as smooth as this is going, you'll probably get to see him yourself."

Tessa understood it all: This was all *his* severe greeting. He and Gauron were in league, and this man was trying to deliver this ship and herself to him personally.



"Now then, Miss AI," Gauron said.

"Yes, captain?" replied the mother AI Dana in the voice of a woman who sounded strangely voluptuous. Gauron's voice print data already must have been input.

"Let's do a little disaster drill. Sound the alarm for a fire and reactor accident. Have everyone gather in the main hangar!"

"Aye, sir."

A spine-chilling siren rang throughout the ship.



CHAPTER 5

Into the Ocean Blue

August 28, 05:00 (Greenwich Mean Time)
Western Pacific Ocean
USS Pasadena

"An alarm sound?" Captain Sailor was puzzled upon hearing the sonarman's report.

"Aye, sir, bearing one-five-eight beneath the thermal layer. We can detect absolutely no propulsion noise, but it is moving—probably from southeast to northwest, apparently at considerable speed."

"Here, let me listen," Captain Sailor insisted as he took the headset and put it to his ear.

Gorrrr, gorrrr. The siren sound he heard was not unlike a wild animal roaring. Beyond it, he could hear a female voice that seemed



to be speaking in English, but what was being said was so unclear that he couldn't pick it up.

"Hmm . . ."

Was it some kind of accident? There was no mistaking that the sound source was a submarine, or that there was no sound whatsoever beyond the siren, which was moving at high speed. In spite of his ship's sonar, no crew sounds could be heard, and the Pasadena was supposed to be the only submarine in this sector. In other words, the sound source was—

"It's Toy Box, captain!" yelled XO Takenaka.

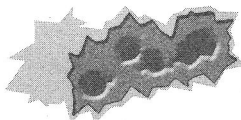
Sailor was miffed. "Why do you . . .? Yeah, that's why I can't . . ."

"Huh?"

"Whatever. In any case, it means he's given himself away. Ahead one-third, ascend to depth one hundred eighty! We'll ambush Toy Box!"

"Aye, sir. Ahead one-third! Depth one hundred eighty!"

The Pasadena slowly rose into shallow water in order to hide itself in the seawater veil.





Tuatha de Danaan, Main Hangar

The crewmen, awoken by an ear-splitting alarm and an AI warning, crowded into the main hangar at once. There was no fear in their expressions, just confusion, mixed with a fair amount of sluggishness. They were energetic, and they scored perfectly on skillfully passing around oxygen masks and life jackets, while efficiently moving ammunition to a safer area toward the bow—but in spite of their agility, they seemed discontent.

Miss Testarossa was mean for holding a fire drill at a time like this. The majority felt that way.

“All crew evacuate to the front of the main hangar. I repeat: There is a fire in engine room two. This is a drill. Compartment one is . . .” According to the alarm, the fire had happened in an engine room at the rear of the ship. Accordingly, there was a large emission of smoke and toxic gas. Control of the reactor was lost, and a dangerous neutron leak was underway, as well. Such a destructive accident shouldn’t happen unless the AI or the captain went berserk. Naturally, it was necessary to be prepared for such a thing, but . . .



This is odd, thought Sousuke. The other NCOs and a handful of officers appeared as though they felt the same.

There now was an important prisoner on board, and there might still be American warships in the vicinity. *A fire drill under those circumstances? Why would someone so intelligent do such a thing as a lark?* Sousuke ran around the main hangar in a crowd of two hundred crewmen busily moving about. *Chidori . . . Where's Chidori?* He didn't see her, and all the sailors he grabbed and asked said they hadn't seen her, either—nor had the cook, Seaman Kasuya.

Sousuke ran to the hangar door toward the ship's stern with the thought of searching for Kaname, but the lieutenant junior grade standing there stopped him.

"You can't—the doors are about to close!" In the drill scenario, the toxic gas was closing in.

"Our guest Kaname Chidori isn't here," shouted Sousuke. "Please, let me go look for her."

"No! Everyone left behind here will soon be dead!"

"But—"

"If you see her later, inform her that she's dead. Now desist, that's an order!"

"N—"



"I *said* it's an order!" The lieutenant went to close the heavy, watertight hatch. Powered by an independent servomotor, the sixteen-inch-thick door began to turn. It was a terribly tight hatch, and once it was locked, it wouldn't come undone, and it completely separated the fore and aft of the ship.

Sousuke had a bad feeling. There was the suspicious fire drill, Tessa's voice nowhere to be heard, Gauron's presence, and Kaname Chidori who was unaccounted for. Also, a superior officer was telling him "no," and violating orders wasn't permitted. Sousuke stood upright, watching the closing hatch, Kaname somewhere on the other side.

Chidori . . . If he were here, he would no longer see her. That baseless premonition overwhelmed him. Her face the last time they met came to mind: eyes ashen with disappointment and dejection. And her words: "In spite of all this, I was worried about you. . . ." *And yet, here I am, in a place like this, worrying about orders. . . .* The next instant, Sousuke slipped through the crack in the hatchway.

"Hey! Damn it!" yelled the lieutenant.

The watertight hatch closed behind Sousuke, followed by the sound of unyielding cylinders sliding into place. In time with a cheap-sounding buzzer, the electromagnetic lock engaged sharply,



causing reverberation. The tumult in the hangar disappeared as though it didn't exist; only the sound of the alarm sustained in his ears.

Before Sousuke's eyes was a deserted corridor. Only red emergency lights blinked in the dimness. He took about ten steps before noticing a man in a field uniform standing at the door to the ready room, leaning against the wall with his arms folded. It was Kurz Weber.

"Kurz?"

"You sure you wanna violate orders?" Kurz asked, his eyes focused on the floor.

"Having said that, why are *you* here?"

"Well, you see, I'm basically the type who hates group behavior, especially things like evacuation drills."

"That's all?"

"That's all." Kurz snorted a little. "But hey, I was thinking someone would probably come by. Who knew it'd be you?"

"Is that strange?"

"Hmm . . . no. I don't know. It figures, though."

The two finally exchanged glances. All ill feelings already were gone.



"Something bad probably is happening."

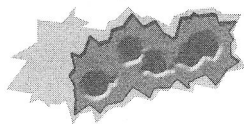
"Yeah, McAllen's not here, either, and neither are several others. When I asked Ms. Peggy, she said that Mao was missing from the infirmary, too."

Looks like Kurz thinks this alarm is weird, too. Something was going on—Sousuke knew that deep down.

Kurz walked over to Sousuke and thumped him on the back. "Let's go."

"Yeah."

They began walking with no weapons or information to speak of. Although they traveled only through the aft half, the ship's interior was huge. They had no perspective and no support, but at least Sousuke and Kurz were the best pair the de Danaan had to offer.



The submarine Tuatha de Danaan was a huge and complex structure, but in simple terms, the hull was divided into two sections: the fore and the aft. The fore housed such ordnance facilities as the hangar, torpedo- and missile-launching equipment, and weapons powder magazines. In the aft were ship facilities, including the command



center, engine room, reactor, residence block, and mess hall. These two halves were divided by a thick bulkhead. If one side were to receive destructive damage—even if it totally flooded—the submarine was designed so that the other half would be fine.

The evacuation order Gauron issued had moved the crew to the hangar in the fore section, and the command center was in the aft. Although he had successfully isolated the crew, they were by no means fools. However, they weren't the type of people to ignore an emergency evacuation order, either. When an alarm like this sounded, all they could do was follow orders without objection. The crew evacuation concluded, the bulkhead hatch closed, and the mother AI Dana locked it completely, making it impossible to open it from the hangar side.

"No one's coming to help you," taunted Gauron.

With the exception of Tessa and Kaname, all the command center crew were tied together with handcuffs and chains, grouped in a corner of the room. Now, they couldn't attack anyone if they wanted to.

"Now I can control this sub freely. Not bad, eh?"

"I beg to differ," Tessa said in a cold voice. "There are Arm Slaves in the hangar. It's possible to cut a hole in the bulkhead with



a monofilament cutter. Dozens of my armed subordinates soon will converge on this command center.”

“Ha ha. That’s why I think I’ll do this: Miss AI?”

“Yes, captain?” answered the AI.

“Reverse the flow of the fore life-support system.”

“Aye, sir.”

Reversing the flow of the life-support system meant halting the supply of oxygen. Nearly two hundred of the crew were located in the fore. If Gauron reversed the flow of the life-support system, they all would eventually die of suffocation.

“Stop it!” yelled Tessa.

“Nope. Because if I don’t dumb them down, those smart subordinates of yours probably will try some trick.”

“All of them will die before that. Please, just a little oxygen—”

“Don’t tell me what to do, or else next time, I really will make the reactor overload. It’d be fun to try to make the sub flip. Or to make it dive deeper and deeeper until the water pressure crushes us. Hmm.”

The ship currently was in full automatic mode under Dana’s control. Nearly all the operation was at Gauron’s whim, so his threats were not just jokes. Yes, the electronically advanced Tuatha de



Danaan could be controlled by one person, with restrictions, but that applied only to actually running the ship. Processing extensive data, analyzing situations, and making accurate judgments required an expert crew of several dozen. A skilled helmsman's abilities surpassed computer control as far as manning the helm, for instance, and maintenance inspections, too, ultimately had to be done by humans. The ship's ultimate strengths—the superconductive propulsion and electromagnetic fluidics control system—could not be used effectively without a crew, either. Because, in full automatic mode, the AI controlled all of that by proxy, there was danger of inviting misfortune, fatal accidents, and tactical errors that a specialist could avoid. The truth was that the de Danaan was in worst-case scenario control mode.

In this situation, it was beyond the crew members' ability to conceal themselves from a single typical military vessel. It was clear that, eventually, the entire ship would be in serious trouble—and that those in the hangar were in danger.

I have to do something. Tessa never had been as aware as she was now of the fate of the entire crew being on her shoulders. Every one of her subordinates—subordinates she had shared a lot with—would die. Feeling an overwhelming amount of pressure, Tessa sorted through



her thoughts. *Right now, the ship's AI Dana considers Gauron to be captain, and there's no way to return this record to normal by conventional means. Gauron's consent would be needed. In that case, there's nothing to do but take control of Dana.*

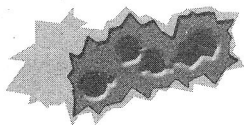
Dana's core was a central computer room called Lady Chapel. Using the special machinery there, one could operate the control system's deepest level by assimilating herself with the ship. Once that was done, command of the ship could be taken back from Dana and Gauron. As with full automatic mode, there were limits on ship control, but if the crew shut up in the hanger were rescued, they probably could reverse this disabled state soon. Tessa strategized to herself.

Assimilation with the ship was a dangerous operation that never had been attempted at sea, but there was no other way. With that being the reality, the next question was how to execute it. Lady Chapel was on deck three, directly below the command center. Positionally and structurally, it was close, but was accessible using only a roundabout route. Besides, the universal key stored in the captain's quarters was needed to enter the room. Could I escape the clutches of Gauron and the others and make it that far?

Tessa had a gun that still hadn't been discovered. It was a German-made twenty-two-caliber pistol hidden under her seat. It



was small, only held a total of seven rounds, and hardly had enough stopping power to kill a puppy. There wasn't a chance in hell she could use that to escape from three combat pros. She would be caught by them immediately, or worse yet, killed. She wasn't good with guns and not fast on her feet. Terribly unathletic, her intentions alone wouldn't be enough. However, she was the only one on board who could assimilate with the submarine in Lady Chapel, commander Dana, and temporarily serve as her replacement. Only her—a Whispered—none of the other crew could ever do it. Well, there was one other, right next to her. . . .



Kaname had been quietly monitoring the situation when something in her mind startled her. Tessa was staring at her from nearby, and her expression was odd—she seemed as though she were thrusting a gun or knife at Kaname. Her typically charming eyes were now open wide like a dead person's, and her features were fraught with a dreadful suffering and indecision that seemed to be saying, "Please die."

She's trying to force me to do something crazy, Kaname perceived intuitively.



Gauron sat at the detached console, chewing on prosciutto. The big man they called Dunnigan occasionally would look at Kaname and smirk. Nguyen leaned to one side and smoked between the two command center exits.

Tessa quietly gripped Kaname's hand from the side, her slender fingers moist with sweat. When she let go, two things were in Kaname's hand: a small scrap of paper and a small key.

Wait, what're these supposed to . . . ? The instant she thought that, she heard a voice.

It's the key to my safe. It was Tessa's voice, or so it seemed. Actually, no one was speaking, not even in a whisper. Neither Gauron, Dunnigan, Nguyen, nor the crew was speaking, and none of them had noticed the voice.

Tessa gazed at the screen in the front of the room with unfocused eyes. *Concentrate. . . . This is resonance. . . . Sense it. . . .*

Eh? Kaname felt the sensation of something soft and gentle permeating the inside of her chest and unknown thoughts echoing throughout her cranium.

Get another key from the safe . . . universal key. Deck three . . . look for Lady Chapel. . . . There, use this again: reso . . . nance.

Wait, what's Lady Chapel?



We move . . . soon . . . have to risk . . .

What's this about? What do I do with the key? Hey, uh, hey. Hey! Kaname gasped. She realized she had been shouting "Hey!" loudly.

Gauron and the others peered at her suspiciously.

"Hey!" what?" inquired Gauron while gnawing on a piece of ham.

"Uh, well . . . um . . ." The situation delicate, she hid the key and paper in her hand. Next to her, Tessa was deeply sighing somewhere short of despair.

"I don't like that. Why'd you suddenly say 'Hey'? Normally you wouldn't say something like that in a situation like this. I want you to tell me." Gauron approached, taking light steps. His gaze suddenly halted on Kaname's clenched fist.

"What do you have? Show me."

Kaname said nothing.

"I *told* you to show me. Didn't you hear me?" Standing upright, Gauron reached out for Kaname's arm.

Tessa acted at the same time. A small pistol grasped in her trembling hands, she aimed at Gauron, and with her eyes practically closed, pulled the trigger. A light, dry gunshot rang out through the command center. Gauron grabbed his neck and was knocked back.





"Kaname, run!" Tessa shouted as she fired in succession at Nguyen, who was at the exit. It was a haphazard, random shooting, but Nguyen reacted instantly, throwing his body to the floor. A regular soldier might have stood there and been hit.

Surprised by her own actions, Kaname dashed forward without hesitation. That Tessa had a gun and had shot someone, and what she herself would do once she escaped—all those thoughts were postponed. If Kaname hesitated here, it all would come to nothing. That much she could understand.

Kaname slipped beside the staggering Gauron when Dunnigan flew at her from behind. He grabbed at her parka, tearing her sleeve from the shoulder. The ripped portion remained in his hand. It worked—she could escape. Whereas normally she would be about to fall down, Kaname corrected her posture with an astounding sense of balance and ran for an exit at full speed. She used a chair to spring from in order to clear the now-risen Nguyen. As she passed through the doorway, a bullet struck and sparks flew off the wall next to her.

"Stop!" bellowed Dunnigan, the shooter.

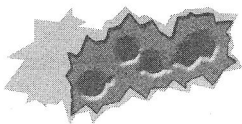
Kaname didn't stop, instead moving away from the command center, keeping low as she edged down the corridor. A bullet



ricocheted overhead, but she ignored it and turned a corner, further losing herself in her run. Heavy footsteps approached from behind accompanied by a ferocious voice.

"Little Bitch. I'll kill you, ya little hussy!"

Kaname's vision blurred, and as she ran farther, she realized she was crying. She couldn't stop thinking about the fate of Tessa, what was going to happen to Kaname herself, and the fact that her new parka was ruined.



"Whoa," said Sousuke.

Kurz stopped in his tracks. Grasping a rough iron pipe, he looked up at the corridor ceiling and narrowed his eyes. "Gunshots . . . probably seven twenty-two-caliber shots. That'd be a Walther?"

"It came from the direction of the command center," said Sousuke.

"I knew it. Shit!"

"Let's hurry."

"Yeah, I know, but still—this is complicated."



They were on deck four, which had various compartments sealed off by locked, watertight hatches. They wouldn't be able to go straight to the command center like they wanted to. As they searched for open doors, they found themselves on an extensive detour; with dead ends everywhere, their usual route was totally unusable.

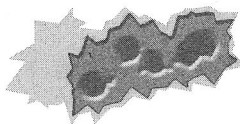
"Most of the sub's under Dana's complete control," said Sousuke.

"Yeah. I think I get why, too. Handy ship, this. Geez."

"Anyway, we'd better run," urged Sousuke.

"You got that right."

Together, they hurried along.



Everyone in the command center was surprised by Kaname's display of spontaneity. Had they thought she were merely a frightened girl in Tessa's shadow, they certainly had been proved wrong. She'd shaken off a muscular combatant, not faltered at being shot at, and vanished like the wind. Gauron and his clan, too, were completely caught off guard by Kaname's amazing agility.



Dunnigan had taken off running in pursuit of her. Whether she could get away, only God knew. All they could do was risk it.

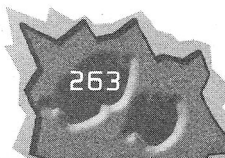
Kaname, please, somehow . . . Tessa murmured in her mind as if praying. Her gun was out of ammo, but the underpowered twenty-two-caliber fulfilled its role splendidly. If the gun had had two eyes, it likely would be winking at her. Walther TPH—for the first time, Tessa felt attachment to the name of a small arm. Of course, this could be the last time.

Holding his neck and doubled over, Gauron slowly turned to Tessa. A bit of blood trickled from between his fingers. The bullet barely had grazed his neck—and unfortunately for Tessa, the wound didn't look as though it would be fatal. The terrorist raised the corner of his mouth into an unnatural smile. His eyes were muddied and liver brown, burning with dark sentiment—probably visions of Tessa being killed hundreds of times over, cut up, and torn apart.

Gauron finally showed his true nature. "Not bad at all, little miss," he said in a voice with absolutely no inflection.

Tessa bluffed with all her might. "I missed because I felt sorry for you. You be sure to thank me."

"Really," Gauron said as he grabbed her braid and pulled her forward roughly.





"Hnnn!" The pain made Tessa shriek unintentionally. Gaaron used enough force to make her fear that her neck was going to break. He grabbed her chin with his bloodstained hand, jerking her face close enough that she could feel his breath. The command center crew witnessed this and struggled—but bound by handcuffs and chains, they could do nothing.

"Don't let it go to your head, sow."

"Arhhh!"

"I was told not to kill you, but honestly, I couldn't care less about that order. Why don't I drag out your intestines and hang them around the room, huh?"

"Hnnn!" Tessa was standing on her tiptoes, trying desperately to withstand the pain, but Gaaron pushed her down to the floor.

He wiped blood from his neck and said to Nguyen, "You, chase after the girl, too. She can't run to the fore section, anyway. Once you catch her, feel free to break one of her legs."

"What about you?" asked Nguyen.

"I can do this alone. Also, there may be crew who ignored the evacuation order. If you find any, kill them, okay?"

"You got it," Nguyen answered candidly, and he left the command center.



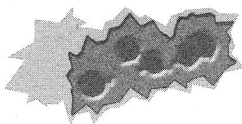
"Now then, Miss Former Captain, I'm very angry, but I won't kill you yet. I've thought of a penalty instead." Gauron wiped blood from his neck with a paper napkin, walked over to the captain's chair, and pushed the vocal orders switch. "AI: surface to periscope depth. Speed: five knots. Search for nearby surface ships using ESM."

"Aye, sir."

The ship quickly began ascending. The quick inversion created turbulence, and the usually quiet hull groaned loudly enough for nearby submarines to detect them, if there were any.

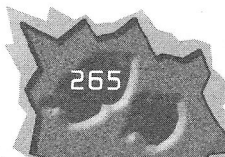
"Wha-what're you—"

"You'll see soon. Yes, soon. Hmm hmm hmm."



Kaname hid herself in the shadow of a cleaning supply bin, from where she could hear the sound of pursuing footsteps pass by in the adjacent corridor. It looked as though she had lost him. *Am I okay now? I don't know, but I can't just stay here.*

She quietly slipped out from behind the bin, her torn parka barely staying on her shoulders. Depressed about her tattered garment, she threw it off. She also was worried about footsteps, so





she removed her trekking boots, too. Had she been wearing sandals back there, she might not have gotten away. The price of the boots that saved her life was ¥13,000, which meant she'd have to come back to recover them later. Now, all she had on was a tank top and shorts; it was as good as being naked. She walked barefoot along the cold floor.

The submarine moved heavily, and the floor inclined a little; Kaname didn't know whether it was toward the fore or aft. Nearly every door was locked, so getting to the captain's quarters was tough. That man following her—Dunnigan—was scary, and he might be waiting for her around a corner or behind a half-opened door. Crossing his path unexpectedly was Kaname's primary fear right now.

As she approached the captain's quarters, Kaname used the passkey to enter. She had been borrowing it from Tessa since she arrived at the ship. The other key, which she recently had been given, was the safe key—that was the important one. The safe embedded in the wall was about the size of a fourteen-inch television. She inserted the key and turned it. There was an eight-digit code written on the paper scrap Tessa gave to her. She punched the buttons, inputting the password number: three-one-one-two-eight- seven-six-five.



The electronic lock released, and the safe door opened without incident. Kaname peered inside and saw a thick file, some documents, and a square case that resembled a jewel box. She intuitively took hold of the jewel-box-like object and opened it. Inside was a sturdy key the size of her little finger with the seal “UNV” carved onto one side of the handle. This was the universal key—there was no mistake about it. Were this a video game RPG, an “item obtained” sound effect would sound about now.

Nothing else that seemed to be a key was in there. However, at the back of the safe was a picture stand, still facedown in the dark. It was the same one from when Kaname first had been led to this room after the party; Tessa had said something about codes and hurriedly shut it inside the box.

I shouldn't look at it. Doing so would be against the rules, thought Kaname. *But it does bother me.* In spite of the fact that she knew she shouldn't, Kaname reached in for the picture frame. As she anticipated, it was a picture of Sousuke. He and Tessa were standing next to each other near some rocks. Tessa wore a T-shirt and leggings, and Sousuke wore a field uniform. Just behind them was an M9 with wet blue paint on it for some reason.

Kaname strongly regretted looking. A third party no doubt would think these two looked like a good couple, and there seemed



to be no space whatsoever for herself. *I'm an outsider—a guest. I'm just . . . baggage. In that case, why am I in a place like this, doing this kind of thing? I'm running and hiding from a professional killer, without knowledge about what he wants—and for whose sake, exactly? Is there some reason I shouldn't die right here? Would I not prefer to throw everything away and cower in a corner of this room?* Strong doubts ran through her mind, and her heart lolled about. She was scared, exhausted, and fed up, but regardless, Kaname kept moving without hesitation—for reasons she didn't understand.

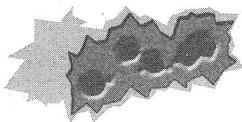
She returned the picture stand to the safe and closed the door. Placing the universal key into her shorts pocket, she started up the laptop on the desk to see if she could glean any useful information, but a passcode was required to use it. She tried the safe password with no luck. After giving up on the passcode, she rummaged through furniture and documents, but she failed to come up with any results.

Sure enough, there's no point staying here, Kaname thought to herself. She had to take the key she had gotten and go to the Lady Chapel. As for what to do once she got there and how to do it, all she could do was deal with it once she arrived. But where was this Lady Chapel? Kaname vaguely remembered what the English term meant. She hadn't a clue what would be in a place like that. Had anyone



been left in the aft of the ship, she could have asked him. *Anyway, I have to look for it.*

But that big man was still wandering around the ship looking for her.



The mother AI Dana reported: "Surface ship detected, bearing three-two-three. Acknowledged as Echo One. Frigate is Knox class. Estimated distance: twenty miles."

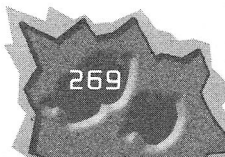
Gauron heard the dispatch and nodded approvingly.

What the de Danaan's sensors had picked up was an old style American Navy frigate. It probably was one of the ships looking for them. Because they had ascended near the surface and the conditions were so rough, the hull was rolling.

What's he going to do? Tessa wondered as she watched Gauron give an exorbitant order to the AI.

"All right. Ready harpoon missiles numbers one and two for launch. The target is Echo One. Firing mode: BOL. You can handle the rest."

"Aye, sir."





So, this was the penalty: Gauron was trying to launch antiship missiles at that frigate.

Tessa stood up and grabbed his arm. "Stop it! They have nothing to do with this. There are close to three hundred people aboard! Besides, this ship will be counterattacked!"

"Huh, you don't say?" replied Gauron nonchalantly.

"If you hate me, then do with me what you will! Don't bring other people into it!"

Tessa's hysteria must have finally satisfied Gauron, because he smiled as if he were happy from the bottom of his heart. "He he. No, I don't think so. It takes more of a toll on a breed like yours to cause pain to people around you, doesn't it? I know full well."

Suddenly, the AI announced: "Target, Echo One. Bearing-only launch mode. Data input: complete. Number one: ready. Number two: ready."

"Okay. Flood tubes one and two," ordered Gauron.

"Stop this, Dana!" yelled Tessa.

"Aye, sir. Flooding complete."

"Open launch tube hatches one and two."

"Stop it, please!"

"Aye, sir. Now open."

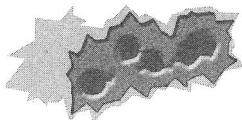


Gauron threw Tessa off his arm and onto the floor. "Watch this, as they say. Ahem! Now, number one, number two—"

"Sto—"

"Launch!"

Upgraded harpoon antiship missiles launched from the Tuatha de Danaan.



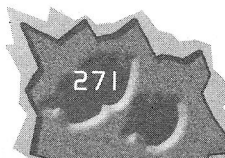
The crew in the hangar heard the missiles launch, too. Commander Mardukas had doubted that serious danger had befallen the ship, but the sound of the launch informed him that matters were far worse than he'd expected.

De Danaan's weapons—underwater launch antiship missiles—had been fired under the mother AI's judgment. *Impossible. This can't be. Not something like . . . no . . . what's impossible? What was I just think—*

"XO, harpoons!" shouted one of Mardukas' subordinates.

"I know. Never mind that. Break through the hatch to the command center."

Up until that point, the command center hadn't responded no matter how many times they hailed it, and the AI's voice had advised





them to stand by. He'd been too cautious. The bulkhead had been closed for thirty minutes; he could delay no longer. He had to send men into the ship's aft to check on the situation.

"To the command . . . center," Mardukas muttered, somewhat winded. He had a headache, it was hard to breathe, and he hardly could focus. He thought it was only him, but the others seemed to be the same way. It was oxygen—the oxygen supply system was broken, or else it had been stopped intentionally.

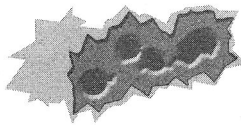
"Put on . . . masks. OBA masks . . ."

Some had fallen to the floor and were not moving. Others lay there, despite having been given oxygen masks by someone else. Some managed to stand up to operate the unresponsive manual oxygen supply panel.

"Use an M9 . . . on the bulkhead," Mardukas tried to shout while clinging to the wall, but his strength failed and he fell to his knees. The room felt as though it were rushing up, or it was him who was falling.

"Cap . . . tain."

Your instructions were correct. You never, by God . . . cease to . . . amaze.





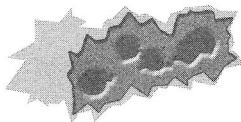
Surface of the Western Pacific Ocean

When the two harpoon antiship missiles fired by the Tuatha de Danaan leapt above the surface, their turbo jets ignited and they soared at an extremely low altitude. Before they had flown twenty seconds, the all-weather models activated their radar seekers and detected their target.

The interior of the old ship's bridge was in a terrible tumult after the sudden attack. With nothing more than a base level ECS, it couldn't hide from variable radar. It tried to meet the attack, but there was too little time. Even so, the ship's CIWS (Close-in Weapon System)—twenty-millimeter Vulcan cannons—barely managed to destroy one of the two incoming missiles. However, the other one was unavoidable. The de Danaan's antiship missile hit the frigate's port side, considerably above the water line. The missile pierced the outer hull, plunged into the helicopter hangar, and carved off the tail of an unmanned antisub helicopter. In spite of the hit, the missile didn't lose momentum, but penetrated the wall on the opposite side. As it fell to pieces and burst into flames, it plunged into the sea on the starboard side.



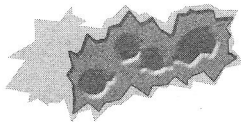
The explosion that should've happened didn't. The warhead had been detached beforehand. Miraculously, no crew were injured, but the maintenance crew who had barely finished work on the helicopter went into a fit of rage and stamped their feet. They, of course, couldn't imagine that their own lives had been saved by a wary girl of only sixteen.



In the sea eleven miles from the frigate, another American warship was astir like a provoked beehive. The fast-attack submarine Pasadena had detected a missile attack by Toy Box against their navy.

The fired-up captain was blue in the face ordering his men to battle stations and to prepare armed Advanced Capability (ADCAP) torpedoes.

Toy Box was an enemy, and an insane one at that. They had to sink it as soon as possible. Pasadena became a bloodthirsty mass, pressing toward the practically helpless de Danaan.





Tuatha de Danaan, Deck Four, Aft

Absolutely nobody's here. Out of breath, Kaname ran down the corridor and into closed doors, trying hard to open them, giving up, and looking for another way. She found nothing but dead ends and didn't understand this Lady Chapel Tessa "talked" about—where the room was or what kind of room it was.

The door-filled structure was like a game dungeon. That big man was here somewhere. He might be nearby, closing in, and Kaname was all but lost.

"Ahhh!" Her foot had gotten caught on a bucket and she fell, causing an outrageous racket. Kaname sprang up in surprise upon hearing footsteps. They were like footsteps, anyway, but she wasn't sure. She wasn't even sure if they were close. The suspicious sound soon vanished.

What . . . was that? she wondered as her anxiety grew stronger. She looked behind her as she walked, and—*thud*—she ran into something. The big man, Dunnigan, stood before her.

"Looky what I found," he jeered.

Kaname tried to run, but his dreadful grip seized her right arm. She continued to try to shake free, struggling desperately. Dunnigan pulled her closer with only one arm and threw her violently. Her one-hundred-eight-

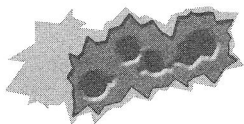


pound body sailed through the air like an empty can. She slammed into a door, back first. The impact opened it, and Kaname tumbled into a cabin. She cut a swatch through some chairs and cowered on the floor. It was such an incredible shock that she was unable to breathe.

Kaname tried to crawl away from Dunnigan as he approached. It wasn't a gun but a knife that her opponent held. *A knife. Why does he have something like that? Why is he dissatisfied with simply catching me?* Her mind went blank, but two words haunted her repeatedly: *I'm dead.*

Dunnigan was trying to torment her. If he wanted to catch her, he never would have thrown her. Kaname saw Dunnigan's expression in the faint red illumination. It was a childlike smile, the face of a boy about to partake in his favorite mischief—like dismembering bugs or frogs, only half for fun.

"That's right, try and run, China girl. Try and run," Dunnigan taunted.



Kaname's racket and screams could be heard from quite far away, even beyond the starboard side corridor. It sounded as though it were coming from deck four, one floor down.



Moments before, Sousuke and Kurz had discovered the corpse of Private Lian in briefing room one, alongside a cast-off straightjacket, handcuffs, and chains. Gauron wasn't there, nor was the submachine gun Lian should have been holding.

"Son of a bitch."

"From around the mess hall."

Sousuke and Kurz gave up investigating the room and ran back into the corridor. The ship was inclined and shaking, which wasn't that big a deal—but as far as they knew, this was the first time the *de Danaan* had moved like that. They ran past several doorways in the deserted corridor. As they approached the stairs to deck four, they sensed someone behind them.

Nguyen appeared from the corner they had just passed.

"Nguyen?"

"Oh, you two. You're all right. Right now . . ." Nguyen approached, waving his left hand. In his other hand was a nine-millimeter automatic pistol.

Sousuke and Kurz intuitively moved left and right rather than standing there to survey the situation. Suddenly, Nguyen fired an unexpected round that flew through their immediate vicinity. The ricochet produced sparks on the nearby wall, and the piercing sound of gunshots rang through the corridor.



"Ha! Naturally!"

Nguyen whistled. "Sagara, looks like your girlfriend's down there. But—"

A bullet hit close to Sousuke's face as he tried to look out. Metal fragments cut his cheek, and he drew his head back.

"I can't let you get there. Sorry."

Sousuke and Kurz still were perplexed. How could Nguyen, an SRT member, turn traitor? Chances are, another one of them from below had, too, but for it to be the old standby, McAllen, was unthinkable. It probably was the newcomer, Dunnigan.

The two of them, hidden on the left and right of the corridor by pipes and cabin doors, were pinned down. The stairway was right there, but they probably would be shot in the back before reaching it. Neither Sousuke nor Kurz had a gun or a knife right now. All they had was Kurz's iron pipe he had picked up along the way. At this rate, Nguyen was right: Kaname was in danger.

"Sousuke, here's how we'll do this," Kurz called out to him in Japanese so loudly that it could be heard down the corridor. "I'll deal with that piece of shit. When I give you the chance, get your ass down those stairs."

"By yourself? But—"



"No arguing. Kaname's in trouble. Go!" Kurz insisted.

"All right."

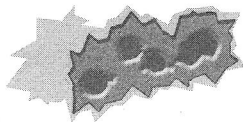
"And you apologize to her," Kurz said, grinning broadly.

Sousuke nodded, standing ready.

Nguyen's footsteps approached. "What're you whispering about?"

Kurz aimed for the sound of the footsteps and threw his pipe from the doorway. "Go!"

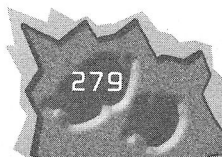
Hearing his cue, Sousuke bolted from the corridor.



The big man was approaching, grinning maniacly and wielding a knife. Kaname grabbed a tubular chair and hurled it, but Dunnigan warded it off effortlessly with his arm. She had managed to stand up and back away when she realized that she was in the mess hall.

"Go for it—run," Dunnigan said mercilessly as he approached. He saw fear in Kaname's eyes and was delighted.

Kaname rushed into the galley, hitting her hip against a table so hard that she staggered. *Not yet. I'm still okay. There are knives in here, and rolling pins, and frying pans.*





Preceded by heavy footsteps, the man entered the galley behind Kaname as if he were diving through the door. Spotting a can of pepper spray on a table, Kaname hurled it and hit his arm. The fine powder inside burst all over, but Dunnigan merely grinned and took a deep breath through his nose.

If you train, you can withstand tear gas to an extent, she remembered hearing Sousuke say once. This man certainly was a trained soldier. Sousuke . . . where is he right now? I guess he won't save me anymore. Not with those cold eyes. He called me a burden. . . .

"You have nowhere left to run," Dunnigan declared.

Kaname threw a bowl, but it was deflected. She launched a spoon. It was meaningless. She projected a carving knife as hard as she could, but it failed to stick like in the movies; instead, it struck handle first and fell to the floor.

"Stay away!"

"Nope, don't think so."

Kaname surveyed the mess hall through the galley window and saw that no one was there. Help wasn't coming. Dunnigan charged again like a tidal wave. Kaname—driven into a corner of the long and narrow galley with no other recourse—was thrown back and forced against the wall. Her muscles surrendered to the hardness of iron, and



she was overwhelmed by the sickening stench of sweat. *I can't breathe. It's pressing. It hurts.*

"Listen, I hate Asians, especially the Chinese. They killed Nick—my Nick! Having to salute the likes of you . . . D'you know how humiliating that is?"

He's insane, thought Kaname. *Nick, who's that? Maybe an old war buddy?*

There was no time to think of anything else. Dunnigan grabbed Kaname's neck and brandished his knife with his other hand, his eyes filled with madness and joy.

"Chidori!" called a voice from the mess hall door. It was Sousuke.

Ah, he's come!

But it was too late; Dunnigan's knife was less than a foot from her face. Sousuke was thirty-odd feet away and on the other side of the wall. There was no way he could make it on time.

Dunnigan seemed to think so, too. For an instant, he subtly reacted to Sousuke's voice, but he soon refocused and put his knife against the nape of Kaname's neck. He meant to finish her off first. His arm tensed, he was going to slash.



She didn't think, "I'm done for." They say pilots of crashing planes continue trying until the last second to move the controls and throttle. Right now, Kaname was such a pilot. Her right hand, which had been flailing and creeping along the nearby washstand, grabbed hold of something. It wasn't a knife or a cudgel; it was oblong and very thin—a plastic board. *Who cares, anything'll do.*

"Hnnn!" Kaname beat her opponent's face with the board as hard as she could. To him, the force of the strike was insignificant, but her action halted his completion of slitting Kaname's throat. Dunnigan's face stiffened with astonishment and shock, and the left side collapsed completely. The skin from temple to chin had come off, revealing yellow fat and pink cheekbone—and as if to mask the atrocious injury, bleeding began very quickly. Agony warped his face into an even uglier state.

"Oh . . . ahh! Ohhhhhh!" Dunnigan released Kaname and stepped back. He put his left hand to his face and uttered a bestial scream. "Gh-gohoh . . ."

Kaname coughed violently, sank against the wall, and inspected the board in her right hand. It was an ABS resin grater used for cooking—with some fresh shavings attached to its surface.

"Heeya!" she yelled as she flung it away.



Dunnigan's blue eyes flared with crazed anger. "B-b-biiitch!" It was a yell to rend earth from sky.

But Kaname, surging with adrenaline, shouted unflinchingly back at her enemy. "I'm not a bitch, okay? C'mon, th-this time, I'll fillet you like a fish!"

Sousuke leapt into the galley. "Dunnigan!"

Dunnigan's response time was quick. He drew the handgun from his hip holster and fired, looking back over his shoulder. While rolling across the floor, Sousuke picked up the fallen knife and hid behind a refrigerator.

Sousuke must not have had a gun, because based on Kaname's experience, if he had carried one, he already would be mercilessly shooting Dunnigan.

"Dunnigan, you were in on it, too," yelled Sousuke.

"That's right, me too!"

"You killed Lian."

"Yup, served him right!"

Sousuke opened the refrigerator door, making an instant shield, but Dunnigan fired anyway. Sousuke's right hand simultaneously thrust out and hurled a knife. It was accurately aimed at his enemy's chest, but Dunnigan bent his upper half first, causing the knife to embed into his shoulder.



In spite of his wound, Dunnigan kept his gun up and firing. "It's no use hiding!" Knowing that Sousuke had no weapons, he advanced, thoroughly intent on getting a surefire kill.

Uh-oh. Kaname rushed out without considering the consequences. She jumped at Dunnigan's arm holding the gun. Her agitated opponent roared and knocked her into an oven, creating cracks in the heat-resistant glass. This created an opening, and by the time Dunnigan looked back, Sousuke had darted out from behind the refrigerator and was rushing the enemy.

"Argh!" Dunnigan swiped laterally with the knife in his left hand, but Sousuke evaded it.

Sousuke thrust the gun in his right hand forward, and he averted his head from in front of the barrel just before discharge.

Grasping both his enemy's arms, Sousuke jumped. His knee violently drove into Dunnigan's chin, throwing him backward. Dunnigan dropped the gun but continued to recklessly wave his knife, slicing off some of Sousuke's hair. Sousuke rolled on the floor, picked up the dropped gun, and in a terribly unnatural pose, aimed straight overhead, firing one, two, three, four shots. Then, the gun was empty.





"Gah! Chine—" Although his torso had taken forty-five-caliber rounds full on, Dunnigan still didn't go down. He stood up straight like Benkei and took a step back, followed by another two steps.

"Sleep on it," mocked Sousuke as he stood up and casually kicked the big man over. Dunnigan hit the floor back first, and the impact made the measuring cups on the washstand bounce a little. That was it: Dunnigan had died with both eyes open, glaring at the ceiling.

Sousuke helped Kaname up from where she cowered under the oven. They were both dripping with sweat, but Kaname was in particularly bad shape. Covered in bruises and abrasions, her hair was a total mess, and her torn tank top had Dunnigan's blood on it.

"Chidori?" Sousuke said, breathing in heaves.

Kaname was dazed and could do nothing but stare at him.

"You aren't injured then. Does anything hurt?"

"Everything," Kaname answered in a frail voice. Her heart hurt more than her body. She had ended up being rescued after all, which relieved her—but at the same time, it made her feel miserable. The two contradictory feelings mixed inside her and melded into one intense feeling. She had been trying to suppress an impending outburst, but now it clearly was about to surface.



"I'm . . ." Suddenly, she remembered the doubt she had felt in front of the safe. She wondered why she hadn't run away, and instead wandered around the ship in search of a clue, and what she'd been trying to prove, facing danger like this. She knew the reason why. "I'm not some baggage," she said in a shaky voice. "I'm not *your* baggage. I'm fine on my own. Just now . . . just now . . . I wasn't . . . scared at all. At all . . ." At that point, words failed. Kaname hung her head, and a stifled sob escaped her choked throat. Hot drops of liquid spilled down her thighs.

"Chidori . . ." Sousuke leaned in and touched her shoulder. After a silence that seemed eternally long, he said awkwardly, "Um . . . I'm sorry. You're . . . of course you're not baggage."

Kaname remained silent.

"Did you forget? You've helped me out multiple times. If you hadn't been there, I would've been dead long ago. This time too. I don't know if I could've taken Dunnigan alone when he had a gun. I probably couldn't have, but because you were here, I . . ." Sousuke hesitated. "Because you were here, I'm here now. So, don't say things like 'I'm fine on my own.'"

Kaname gazed at him with eyes full of tears. Their eyes met for a moment, but Sousuke quickly looked away. He scratched his temple with his index finger, looking disturbed and astonished.



"Okay, I hear you," Kaname said, still sniffing. When she noticed blood oozing from his leg and shoulder, she said, "Sousuke, you're injured."

"I'm fine. It's superficial. First aid can wait."

"Really?"

"Really. Don't worry. Can you stand?"

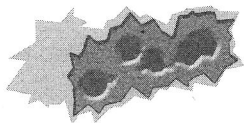
"Yeah." Kaname grasped the hand Sousuke offered and found it to be warm, soft, and very reassuring.

Unexpectedly, a high-pitched sound resounded throughout the submarine. It was a sound she'd never heard: It was almost as if metal had hit the hull and created a thunderous reverberation.

"That was attack sonar," Sousuke scowled.

"What does that mean?"

"It means some submarine's trying to launch a torpedo at this ship."



USS Pasadena



The Pasadena once again caught the sound of Toy Box starting to dive into deep water. It was accelerating northward at about thirty knots, and it was roughly four miles away. Toy Box was making so much noise that it seemed as though it were a different ship than before. When the contact incident had occurred several days ago, it had maneuvered so gracefully, but now it was like a whale drowning because it had forgotten how to swim.

They virtually glided through the water, moving into ideal attack position. With active sonar, they finally inferred the ultimate enemy ship's position. This fast attack sub was loaded with the latest model of Mk-48 torpedoes known as ADCAPs—the speed of which easily could break sixty knots. The torpedoes were loaded with about six-hundred-sixty pounds of explosive, enough destructive power to sink any type of warship. Right now, two of those ADCAP torpedoes were anxiously waiting for the moment they would launch.

“Launch tube doors number three and number four are open. We can launch at any time!” announced Executive Officer Takenaka. His tone was lively, but his voice was understandably stiff with tension. He scanned Captain Sailor's sharp eyes for any sign of verification.

“Sir, this is for real?”

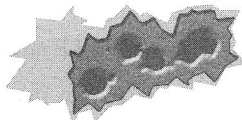


"It's for real! If we let this go, we'll be the ones who buy it," Sailor answered sternly. "No need to go easy. Number three, launch!" he ordered.

"Aye aye, sir! Number three, launch!"

Compressed air launched the ADCAP. Leaving a thin trail of bubbles, the torpedo plunged through the water. Firing only one initially was Sailor's unusual tactic. Several minutes from now, the Pasadena would fire the other ADCAP. The enemy ship probably would execute reckless maneuvers in an effort to avoid the first—and if it somehow evaded that one, and managed to avoid a fatal wound, the belated second torpedo would rush in to finish it off.

They would be sure to make the kill. That was all the crew of the Pasadena hoped for. According to calculations, the first torpedo would reach Toy Box in about six minutes.



Tuatha de Danaan, Central Command Center



"High-speed screw sounds in water at bearing two-nine-eight. Estimate a type of torpedo, count one. It is likely approaching this ship," announced Dana in a frustratingly calm voice. Had it been a skilled sonarman, he would have known and reported on torpedo type, count, speed, depth—anything and everything—in a flash. However, the extent of this information reflected the limit of Dana's capabilities.

A sea chart was displayed in expanded mode on the screen at the front of the command center. The mark indicating the torpedo was shown slowly approaching the de Danaan. There were less than five minutes left. Now that superconductive propulsion was unusable, it was impossible to forcefully shake it off. They could not evade. If they were hit directly, probably not even the gigantic de Danaan could avoid sinking. Everything would be crushed by the destructive water pressure and smashed to pieces, only to become scattered remains on the ocean floor thousands of feet below.

"This is the worst," Tessa muttered, glaring at Gauron nearby. "Return control of the ship to me immediately. Just release the helmsmen and sonarman. I swear, I won't allow them to resist!"

"Nooo," said Gauron thoughtlessly.



"It's the difference between this ship sinking or not. Whether or not I can avoid it, you could never hope to!" exclaimed Tessa.

"I won't know that until I try, will I?"

"You'll die too! Are you committing suicide?"

"Suicide?" Gauron smiled as if he were indulging in some terribly dark humor—the devil's joke even. "Suicide, huh? If so, it'd be the most magnificent suicide in the world. I mean, I'd be taking a multibillion-dollar ship with me. I don't think that's so bad."

He's the shadow of death. Tessa realized for the first time that this man had no attachment to living. He was merely bait in a reckless terrorist operation. He'd exposed himself to the danger of being taken captive, and he'd wildly launched a missile attack on a U.S. Navy ship. These were not the actions of someone intending to return somewhere alive. *We misread him from the start. How could this be?*

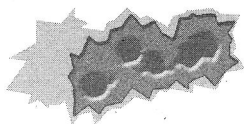
"Let's play chicken then. Dive to depth fifteen hundred," ordered Gauron.

"Warning: That order exceeds maximum practical depth," replied Dana.

"I don't care. Let's give it a try."

"Aye, sir."

The ship inclined even more and began to drop into the abyss.



Kurz's dangerous drama continued. Nguyen was down the corridor with a gun, and Kurz was unarmed. Kurz wanted to face him courageously, but it was all he could do to keep running about. If he went outside the doorway, he'd end up being a running target. He was dealing with an SRT member's marksmanship—so no matter how agile Kurz was, he wouldn't be able to escape Nguyen's aim.

The earlier attack sonar sound probably was a U.S. submarine, and a torpedo likely would be right behind. At this rate, the ship would be sunk. The scenario couldn't be worse; it defined the saying "troubles from within and without."

"The way things are going, we're both gonna be in Davy Jones' locker. You okay with that?" Kurz shouted.

Nguyen laughed. "I'm fine. From what I hear, this sub can run faster than a torpedo."

"You dumbass. The latest torpedoes are killer fast, and we're up against the U.S. Navy!"

"So what then? We get together and pray? Give your stupid bluffing a rest," Nguyen sneered in a tone of absolute superiority.



"But . . . I know. Come out with your hands up, Kurz. I don't mind sparing you."

"Eat shit and die," Kurz spat out.

Nguyen broke into laughter. "I mean it. Let's go to the command center together. We'll talk to Gauron, and then kill one of the crew or something. Then, you'll be one of us. You'll get paid, too."

"Oh man, puh-leeze." Now it was Kurz's turn to laugh. He envisioned himself walking out with his hands up and begging for his life saying, "All right, I'm switching sides, too." This was pathetic. It was shameful enough that he'd burst out laughing during a crisis like this.

"*My girl* could *never* be proud of me. Nguyen, you're such a disgrace."

"Shut up," his opponent said disdainfully, his voice becoming more and more grim. "You want me to tell you how much Gauron's organization's paying me? Five million dollars."

"Fi—?" That was about six hundred million in Japanese yen. It was enough to live in idle luxury an entire lifetime.

"There's already two million in my account as an advance payment. And why not? If they get their hands on a multibillion-dollar sub, five million's a drop in the bucket. Five million, you hear



me? Can you still laugh and say ‘disgrace’ and ‘puh-leeze’? Unless you’re some rich kid who never had to work, you shouldn’t be able to talk that way.”

With that much money, Kurz never would have to worry about the cost of tomorrow’s food. He’d have security for life and probably would spend every day having fun on some southern island. He also could wash his hands of this bloody work, and could transfer *her* to a better hospital.

“Listen, Kurz, Mithril is a mercenary outfit—they’re not heroes of justice. I said this before: They’re a bunch of hit men hired for money. Isn’t it common sense to go with the client who offers more money?”

Kurz didn’t know how to respond.

“It’s not profitable to try to look good and do your duty. Come out.”

Kurz surveyed the cabin in which he was standing. It was a sailor’s bedroom—nothing special. There were bunk beds and personal effects, pictures of Tessa in uniform stuck to the wall, and there was nothing that could be used as a weapon—except for a fire extinguisher next to the doorway.

“I’ve made up my mind, Nguyen,” Kurz said.

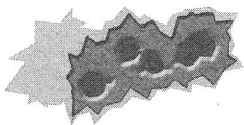


"Oh?"

"I'll take care of you, then pester Tessa for a bonus. I'll take a sexy shot of her in a swimsuit, and sell the prints off to guys on the ship for twenty bucks each. If one hundred of them buy, that's two thousand dollars. That settles it."

"I thought you were a little smarter than this," Nguyen said in a strangely calm voice.

Kurz's sense of smell picked up on a strong urge to kill coming from the corridor. "It's got nothing to do with smart. I'm just realistic," he said as he picked up the fire extinguisher and stood ready.



Sousuke happened to have some recollection about the Lady Chapel about which Kaname spoke. It was in the interior of deck three, just below the command center. On the map of the submarine that regular crew and land combat personnel could inspect, only that part was painted out in black, and no name was written in. Sousuke had not thought deeply about it, but the existence of that secret compartment had long been in the back of his mind.



The crew of the de Danaan was made up of various races and religions, so there was no post such as chaplain or facility such as a chapel. It was the captain's directive that each person should engage in worship in his or her own way. Was Lady Chapel itself a secret chapel that had been hidden away?

"Just a little farther. Keep going," Sousuke urged as he hurried to the room on deck three, pulling the staggering Kaname by the hand. He was worried about Kurz, but right now, taking back control of the ship from Gauron was more important. The only clue they had was hidden in the words Tessa had entrusted to Kaname.

The tremors rattling the hull continued, and the floor was inclined considerably. It was similar to a passenger plane taking a nosedive. Clamorous noise could be heard from various points around the ship, and small articles were falling to the floor from desks and shelves.

Sousuke and Kaname turned a corner, practically falling in the process, and discovered a door at the end of the long, narrow corridor. On the door were two letters—LC—and a warning that read: "Without permission of the captain or executive officer, entry into this room is forbidden."

"Chidori, the key?"



"I have it. Here. Ah, it went in." After she inserted the key from the captain's quarters, there was an electronic sound and the massive door opened.

The room—Lady Chapel—was cramped. Dimly lit, it was a dome-shaped space, about thirteen feet in diameter, and all the walls were filled with countless square modules. From the inside, the construction looked exactly like a Kamakura hut in Japan's snow country. On each module were codes such as A01 and XI6, as well as a number of switches and handles. There was a large machine installed in the center of the dome that looked both like a bed and a chair—or a coffin with the lid off. It was shaped so that one person could stretch out on it, and the cover slid so that said person could be completely enveloped by it. It vaguely resembled an AS cockpit block. At about eye level on the cover hanging over it, English words were etched in an elegant typeface: "Transfer and Response 'Omni-Sphere'/System I03/Mod-I997 c Ver I.01."

Sousuke had heard an acronym for one of the words written there: TAROS. It was the equipment that the engineering officer, Ensign Nora Lemming, had said was inside the Arbalest. Why was that in the deepest part of the Tuatha de Danaan? He casually glanced at Kaname.



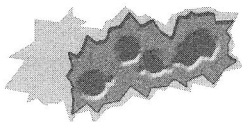
She looked down at the equipment—TAROS—and said quietly, “This looks like an older model TAROS than the Arbalest’s. What’s connected to it isn’t a Lambda Driver, it’s this ship’s control system.”

“What?”

“I think I get it. Yeah, makes sense,” Kaname said in a subdued voice. Her articulation and profile seemed as though they were someone else’s. She nodded and gazed at Sousuke with gentle eyes.

“Chidori?”

Kaname faced him, noticed that he was taken aback, and smiled. “Thank you, Mr. Sagara. You may feel free to go now. But would you come and rescue me later?”



Kurz aimed outside the doorway and sprayed the fire extinguisher, creating an instant smokescreen. The fine white powder enshrouded the area, and visibility dropped to almost zero. He promptly jumped out into the corridor and dashed full speed at Nguyen.

The enemy fired, and the bullet nicked Kurz’s arm. Thanks to the gunshot, he had a good idea of Nguyen’s position. When



he sprang upon him, his opponent lithely turned aside, but Kurz somehow grabbed the wrist of Nguyen's gun hand.

"Ha!" Something flashed from Nguyen's left hand. When he reflexively averted his head, a knife shallowly cut the nape of Kurz's neck. He was sliced again as he pulled back his arm and immediately released his opponent's wrist. Because Kurz's balance was thrown off a bit, the attack barely missed a vital area.

Shit! Kurz had thought maybe he could even the odds if he could only get close, but that had been overly optimistic. Nguyen also excelled at knife combat, and he had no blind spot. Expert handgun and knife handling were ideal for combat in a confined space like this. It was no exaggeration that Kurz was a genius with a rifle, but his close combat senses were no more honed than an ordinary expert's. He was moderately good, but only satisfactory in quality. He was definitely outmatched by Nguyen.

The point of the knife propelled toward him swiftly. He parried belatedly with his arm, and the knife struck his shoulder, causing burning pain to surge through it.

"Hnnn . . . o-ohhh!" Kurz grabbed his opponent's arm that was holding the knife, forcefully pulled on it, and collapsed backward onto the floor. From that position, he raised up Nguyen's body



with his legs, throwing him backward overhead in an unorthodox fashion. Though he had avoided the threat of the knife and they were separated, Kurz again would be a target. He stood up and tried to take refuge in the nearby corridor bend.

The next instant, a dull shock and pain ran through his right leg. The knife Nguyen had thrown was stuck in the back of Kurz's thigh. Strength left the leg he was about to step down on, making him stagger and fall to his knees. He clung to a pipe on the wall, turned around, and saw Nguyen's pistol aiming his way. It was a mere ten-foot range—there was no escape now.

Amid the white mist rose a swarthy face—the expressionless face of a murderer with the eyes of a soldier who could kill automatically. They were cold, cruel, and devoid of indecision or friendliness.

I'm dead. Immediately after Kurz silently pronounced his fate, something strange happened: Nguyen's head convulsed slightly as if he'd been shocked. Kurz noticed a surgical scalpel sticking out of his neck. Both Nguyen's eyes were open in shock and peered down the starboard corridor. Whoever had thrown the scalpel seemed to be there, but was not visible from Kurz's position.

Once more, a silver flash penetrated the dimness. A scalpel landed in Nguyen's chest. After looking down at his chest as though



he'd remembered something, Nguyen pointed his pistol at the unseen someone.

By that point, Kurz had mustered his strength and was moving toward Nguyen. Kurz extracted the knife penetrating his leg, held it at his hip, and charged. It felt like a *yakuza* movie. From his heart, he tried yelling, "Your life is mine!"

A simple assault was one thing, but an attack that was difficult to avoid was something Nguyen couldn't dodge. Kurz thrust the knife into the enemy's abdomen, causing an unpleasant crunching sensation. Nguyen moaned and shot the floor. He fired another shot, but the momentum knocked the gun from his hand.

"It's worthless, Nguyen," Kurz said, struggling to breathe through his nose. "From where I stand, that five million's the same as wastepaper. Y'know, I wouldn't even wipe my ass with it. I'd get hemorrhoids, and it'd stop up the toilet!"

Nguyen's eyes rolled toward the ceiling, and he didn't move. He already had expired. It was a bit much that the last words whispered within an earshot were such things as "wipe my ass," "hemorrhoids," and "toilet," but you reap what you sow.

Kurz moved away, and the former Urzu Ten fell limply to the floor.



"Whewww." Kurz crouched down next to the body, the stab wounds in his shoulder and leg hurting like hell.

Pushing through the fire extinguisher smoke, a human shape slowly approached. It was the person who had thrown the scalpel at Nguyen's blind spot. It was Mao, dressed immodestly in underwear, an olive-colored sports bra, and bikini bottoms—what she was wearing as she slept in the infirmary. Her smooth skin was slightly sweaty, her legs slender, her bust abundant, and her waist and hips were taut. She possessed the beauty of a leopardess.

While Kurz gaped, Mao scratched her head. "Kurz, you really have the worst sense for close combat. You jumped at him and separated like a hoodlum. I couldn't watch." She seemed a little off, as if she were hazy. "Who is . . . that? Oh, Nguyen. What the hell? Why did he . . . what? Huh?" She studied the corpse, muttering cryptic words.

"Where've you been, girl?" asked Kurz.

"Uh, me? Probably in the infirmary. When I woke up, there was an evacuation drill alarm going off. I didn't wanna . . . go to the hangar dressed like this, so I hid. Definitely. Then, gunfire started up over here. . . ."

"Whoa, whoa," said Kurz.



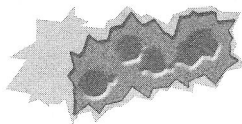


"Maybe Peggy . . . shot me up with some weird drug. I don't know what's going on. What happened to Venom? Where's Sousuke? And . . . ugh . . . my head's reeling." Mao sighed lightly and leaned against the wall. It seemed that walking was the most she could manage. For her to use scalpels for that stunt in this condition . . .

"Scary chick," Kurz said plainly.

All of a sudden, the pinging sonar sound resounded throughout the ship, this time repeatedly and intermittently, until the interval gradually shortened. It was the sound of a nearby torpedo probing. Regardless of whether Kurz hurried to the command center from here, he wouldn't make it—the torpedo would sink the *de Danaan* before that. There were no options left. He had let Nguyen slow him down too long.

Despite the fact that Kurz had fallen into despair, he gazed at Mao's supple body and muttered, "Shit! And here I am without a camera."



Ping . . . ping-ping-ping. The detection sound accelerated quickly. The torpedo had gotten that close. The repetitive pings produced an



overture to destruction, a rhythm of fear that ridiculed the de Danaan as it continued to dive into deep water. The latest model ADCAP was tough. Regardless of their depth, they couldn't escape.

The submarine's depth soon would reach fifteen hundred feet. The water pressure was fifty atmospheres, and the titanium alloy hull was starting to succumb to the power of raging seawater. The span of the craft had become several feet shorter due to water pressure, and the forcefully contracted hull was warping all the internal structures. From ruptured pipes gushed water, steam, and pressurized air, and sparks jumped from wrenched cables.

Dana discharged her irresponsible warnings: "Out of order. Warning: fire outbreak in deck three, corridor B. Warning: rupture in System C, water main number sixteen. Warning: abnormal sound in deck one, pressure bulkhead. Warning . . ."

Dreadful noises, from the hull creaking to the sonar sounds, reverberated through the control center. Gaaron reclined in the captain's chair and laughed raucously. "Yeahhh, that's right! Here it comes!"

Desperation, self-abandonment. Such words failed to describe the laughing voice of death. However, one thing was certain: This man was enjoying the present situation with all his heart. He really did feel alive.



This isn't right. The deck officer, Lieutenant Goddard, felt a chill tingle his spine. Was he going to die handcuffed in this helpless situation, without unleashing the tempestuous power this ship possessed, and never again seeing its magnificent cruising abilities?

The Tuatha de Danaan was designed on the premise of sneak attack operations in shallow waters, and activity in seawater this deep was never stressed in the first place. The calculated practical maximum depth was twelve hundred feet, and the fatal pressure level was sixteen hundred feet. Fatal pressure meant that the ship would be crushed to pieces. They were a mere one hundred feet from that depth, and behind them was a high-speed torpedo.

Despite their seemingly doomed situation, Captain Teletha Testarossa crouched next to Gauron, holding her silence. She faced the floor, her eyes half closed, and she moved her mouth as though she were delirious with fever. She didn't react to the AI's warnings or Gauron's words. Perhaps she was unable to accept this cruel reality and had shut herself up in her own shell. It meant that as capable as she was, she still was a sixteen-year-old girl. Goddard felt deep sympathy and slight disappointment for her.

The command center had two entrances, but Dana had locked both from the inside. No one would come to the rescue.



When the torpedo was within sixteen hundred feet, Gauron shouted, "AI! Hard to starboard! And let loose some decoys!"

"Aye, sir."

When he heard what had transpired, Goddard resigned himself. *It's no use—we can't avoid it. It's too fast, and dodging to the right is useless. Damned amateur.*

"Let's go, dodge it! Can you do it? No, maybe you can't?" yelled Gauron.

Right before the probing sonar reached its peak in anticipation of the approaching torpedo, the command center's front screen completely blacked out for an instant. Goddard and the other crew thought the blackout, no longer than a long blink, was suspicious, and Teletha Testarossa quickly raised her head.

Tessa's eyes held no despair or grief. With cool-headed will and quiet confidence, she spoke in a carrying voice: "Dana, on my signal, launch countermeasures number one and number two. Deep sea mode."

"Aye, *ma'am*," answered Dana.

Gauron, Goddard, and the others opened their eyes wide in surprise as they all stared at Tessa's profile. She didn't seem to notice their gazes as she lifted a beautiful index finger and traced a rhythm in the manner of an orchestra conductor.



Her fingertip elegantly expressed a melody of restoration.

"Right . . . not yet . . ." With superhuman patience, she took the torpedo fully in hand.

The sonar probe now sounded like an alarm clock. The hit was imminent.

Tessa ordered concisely, "Launch."

"Countermeasures released," responded the AI. The de Danaan obediently released decoy sound sources as countermeasures.

"Follow with an emergency blow—now!"

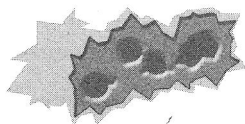
"Aye. Emergency blow!" An alarm sounded, and the emergency surfacing water drainage apparatus kicked in. An explosion-like sound echoed through the ship, and pressurized air forcefully pushed seawater out of the ballast tanks, instantly making the hull buoyant. Spouting countless bubbles, the Tuatha de Danaan began its sudden rise.

Due to the tremendous noise and unexpected maneuver, the torpedo completely lost its target. Only the countermeasures Tessa had launched with superb timing were left in its detection range. The torpedo rushed toward the decoys and activated its fuse, exploding directly beneath the de Danaan.

The shockwave beat into the sub's underbelly, lifting up the huge frame powerfully. Every crewman and unsecured fixture bounced off



the floor and tumbled. Tessa's body was thrown against the aft wall of the command center, and even Gauron seemed as though he would be thrown from the captain's chair. The hull shrieked louder than the howl of a large beast, and yet the de Danaan continued to soar up through the sea like a balloon or a rocket. To put it more lyrically, it was like a bird flapping in the sky.



USS Pasadena

"They avoided it?" asked Sailor.

"Yes sir. They seem to have used an emergency blow. They are now headed for the surface at high speed."

"At that range? Impossible. Shit!"

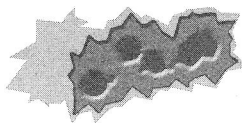
To escape the torpedo's cone-shaped detection range, all they could do was draw along until the last second and make a sudden maneuver. But for a craft that size to stick with it that long . . .

"Who *is* this guy? That captain . . . has he got balls of steel or something?"



"He certainly is . . . amazing. Unbelievable nerve," Takenaka said, dumbfounded.

The other delayed torpedo was now headed for Toy Box, with three minutes until impact.



Tuatha de Danaan

The submarine headed for the surface at full speed, and the floor shook turbulently. Tessa stood up, clinging to the command center wall as Gaaron, Lieutenant Goddard, and the rest of the crew watched her. Goddard gazed at her like a boy in love.

"What kind of magic did you use?" Gaaron asked.

"Can't you tell? If not, it means you don't have as much of *his* confidence as you thought," Tessa replied confidently.

Caught off guard, Gaaron said nothing.

"This ship is mine now. I will *not* let you do with it as you please!"

The status board on the front monitor had expanded, and although Tessa had not commanded it, the craft was returning to a



normal state of functionality. It indicated that the hatches separating the fore and aft sections were opening one after the next. The oxygen supply system sent atmosphere into the hangar instantly. Engine output reached a reasonable level, and a careful self-diagnostic began. Failed systems were isolated and backups operated. The submarine's condition quickly changed from solid red to green. It wasn't Dana; someone else was controlling the ship.

"That girl?" Gauron ground his teeth.

Tessa smiled. "She's the best. Even if you kill me, she will protect this ship, and—"

Suddenly, the locks to the command center entrance were released, and the port side door opened forcefully. A soldier holding a handgun plunged into the command center like a gale. It was Sousuke. He didn't yell out, but Gauron delivered a lateral spray of his submachine gun in his direction. Sousuke rolled on the floor while simultaneously firing his gun.

Gauron took a round in his left shoulder, and even as he staggered a step, he jumped at Tessa and used her as a shield. Sousuke wasn't hit and nimbly hid half his body behind a console.

"Kashim!"

"There's nowhere to run. Surrender!" Sousuke ordered.



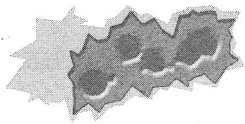
Gauron smiled, thrusting his submachine gun toward Tessa's jaw. "Think I'd do it? Think it over, honey."

"I'll bet," Sousuke said with his gun pointed directly at Gauron. Sousuke tried to take a shot at his head, but Gauron skillfully moved Tessa's body back and forth.

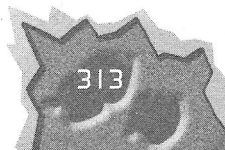
"Mr. Sagara, I don't mind. Do it!" Tessa shouted as Gauron dragged her and backed away, meaning to exit through the other door—the starboard side exit.

Sousuke concentrated as hard as he could and lined up his sights with Gauron's forehead. He focused on the scar he himself had put there three years ago. The instant he was about to pull the trigger, though, a violent shock jolted the command center. Everyone was thrown from their positions and against the floor, walls, and ceiling.

The de Danaan had bounded out of the water as part of its emergency surfacing procedure.



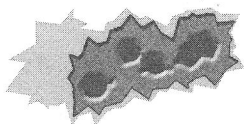
The skyscraper-sized giant broke through the severely stormy surface and towered into the empty sky. Water expelled like waterfalls from





multiple drainage hatches. It was a tumultuous surfacing. When the momentum reached an apex, the bow began slowly descending. It gradually accelerated and was finally brought down on the surface like a god's hammer. The sound of the craft striking—tens of thousands of tons in weight—was indistinguishable from horrendous thunder.

The sturdy hull somehow withstood the shock. The bow again moved up and down several times, spraying a large amount of water to and fro, and floated in the middle of the storm. The sky was shrouded in gray, the waves raged, and the storm struck the hull from the side. There was shaking in all directions—horrible conditions for reliable navigation—but the Tuatha de Danaan remained in good shape.



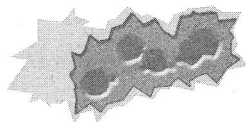
As the submarine quaked, Kaname felt her pain and let out a faint sigh. She felt as though her spine was creaking and her skin was sizzling. No, it definitely was not her body hurting—that was simply her impression. Encased in the Tuatha de Danaan's innermost part, she had integrated with the ship.



TAROS—the mysterious bed that held her frame—read her brainwaves and her entire body's electric potential and coalesced them into the sub's control system. Although there were people—Sousuke or Gauron, for instance—who could momentarily connect to TAROS, the only ones who could continuously exchange minds with it and swim at will inside the Omni Sphere were Whispereds such as Kaname and Tessa.

Omni Sphere was the reverse side of matter. There were various ways to draw out that power through TAROS, one of them being synchronizing with the craft. Kaname already understood that the Lambda Driver was nothing more than another method. The reactor was her heart, the ballast tanks were her lungs, the innumerable pipes were her blood vessels, and the two pairs of diving planes were her wings. Everything worked according to her will and her body. The mother AI Dana indicated allegiance to her, as well. If Kaname said, "Die," ship functions would cease. If she said, "Restore the captain," the mistaken registry would be negated.

Kaname heard sounds: the ocean beneath a storm—another torpedo running up from the deep, aimed at her and barreling at full speed. However, she knew not to worry. Tessa had said so.



The shock from the emergency surfacing was greater than expected. Sousuke dropped his pistol and knocked the back of his head against a console panel. A typical person would have fainted, but he shook his head, clenched his teeth, and somehow got up. As he surveyed the command center, he saw that the members of the crew were firmly bunched up, strung together by handcuffs, and cursing and groaning. Tessa was stretched out feebly on the starboard side floor. Gauron was nowhere to be seen. He must have escaped in the confusion.

Shit! thought Sousuke. *Gauron's evil luck never fails. It seems as though that guy has a deal with death.* Sousuke picked up his gun.

"Sergeant!" shouted Lieutenant Goddard. "First undo our handcuffs. There's another torpedo inbound. We have to get control of the ship *now*."

"Yes sir!" Sousuke knew it was urgent, and he also needed to check on Tessa. He rushed over to Goddard and the others and blew apart the handcuff chain with his gun.

Freed from their bindings, the crew practically flew to their respective seats, but the pursuing torpedo was too close. The



ship, having surfaced so fast, couldn't dive right away, nor could it maneuver well in this storm. This time, it was unavoidable.

"ADCAP at bearing two-seven-eight! Distance: sixty . . . fifty . . . it's all over!" shouted Petty Officer Dejrani as he dove into the sonar room.

The sonar probe escalated mercilessly, and the marks on the front screen denoting the *de Danaan* and the torpedo overlapped. The entire crew braced for the explosion. Sousuke squatted on the floor to shield the unconscious Tessa. The explosion didn't happen, though. Instead, the torpedo passed beneath the *de Danaan*, circling unsteadily. Although it seemed to head for them on several occasions, it refused to rise above a fixed depth, instead wandering aimlessly in the vicinity of the submarine as if it were lost.

"What the . . . ?" said Sousuke, his eyes fixed on the screen.

"Aha, the torpedo's safety device," uttered Goddard as he took his hand off the chair he had been clinging to. "There's a U.S. Navy surface ship nearby, so the other submarine set its torpedoes not to go above a fixed depth in order to avoid friendly fire."

Perhaps Tessa used the emergency blow because she expected the arrival of the second one. To think she took fixed depth into account. Goddard let out a sigh.

"I swear—she's incredible."

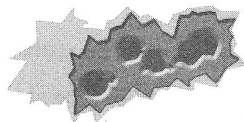


Realizing that they were saved, the crew regarded one another with clumsy smiles.

"Lieutenant, sir. Please see to the colonel. I'll chase after him," Sousuke said, gazing down at her face as she let out a small sigh, completely exhausted.

"Yeah, you got it. Be careful, sergeant."

Sousuke ran off. *Gauron . . .* He had a premonition. *It's about time to finish this*, some part of his mind proclaimed.

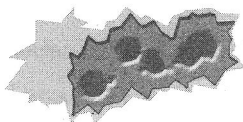


USS Pasadena

"We missed again. Shit!" Captain Sailor raised his voice and stamped his feet. "It seems they were aware of our safety protocol from the start. Or else it was a coincidence. . . ."

"Can it. Release the torpedoes' depth limit and shoot again. Flood launch tubes number one and number two!"

The Pasadena didn't give up, either. The ship began to rise in order to fire still more torpedoes.



Tuatha de Danaan

The state of the main hangar was painful to watch.

It was soon after a subordinate supplied an oxygen mask to Lieutenant Commander Mardukas, helping him come to, that the shock occurred. He realized the submarine was performing an emergency surfacing, so in a hazy state, he was able to advise everyone to grab onto something. Nearly all the crew dizzily obeyed, but because the hangar was situated toward the bow of the ship, the repercussions of the impact were that much greater.

All the crew were thrown hard to the floor and were injured to some degree, some seriously. Mardukas sprained his left elbow and grazed his temple, leaving him with a terrible headache. His glasses suffered a miserable crack and a bent frame, and even now they threatened to slip off.

Helicopters, Arm Slaves, all kinds of support vehicles, and even ammo containers had been firmly secured by hooks, so a truly horrible



accident had been avoided. If the restraints of only one helicopter had come loose, the craft would've jumped around the hangar, possibly killing dozens. This was a valuable experience. Securing cargo in the hangar was exceptionally important. *From here on out, we'll be consistent with regulations*, Mardukas decided.

At some point, the tightly sealed bulkhead hatch had been released, and the life support system also had returned to functionality. The same was true of all other locks and machinery. Without hearing instructions from Mardukas, the crew who could move fled the hangar and hurried to their posts. Those with no orders tended to the critically wounded and helped transport them to the infirmary.

Fielding the roaring commotion, Mardukas picked up a ship intercom receiver.

"This is the control center," responded Lieutenant Goddard.

"It's me. What's going on? Fill me in," Mardukas said.

"XO, you're all right! It was that terrorist. He hijacked the AI. The bastard used the sub like it was his plaything. However, the captain took care of it somehow. Dana has been restored. You know, she really is a—"

"What happened to the terrorist?" Judging by Goddard's tone, he knew the captain was all right, so Mardukas pressed him for answers.



"He got away. He still must be lurking somewhere. We were about to announce a warning—"

"Hurry and do so, you twit! Don't forget to describe his physique and appearance." Mardukas was aware that Goddard also was busy checking out the ship, but he ended up raising his voice. "I mean, sorry. After that, send guards to the reactor and engineering, and to Lady Chapel. This is most urgent, so post four armed land combat personnel at each," Mardukas said in a more diplomatic tone.

Mardukas' eyes stopped on a soldier running across the other side of the hangar. He wore a land combat personnel field uniform. He was Asian, his shoulder was bleeding, and there was a submachine gun in his hand. His face wasn't easily visible, but it still was apparent from a distance that his glasses were broken.

"XO?" Goddard called out.

Nearly everyone was injured, and there were a number of Asian personnel on the submarine. *It's strange, though,* thought Mardukas, *why is that soldier running toward the red AS they seized at the Perio Archipelago? Why is he so skillfully reconnecting the generator's power cable?*

"Goddard. That terrorist . . . is he wounded?"

"Aye, sir. He was shot by Sergeant Sagara."

"In the left shoulder?"



"Aye."

"Bloody hell," Mardukas exclaimed before he dropped the receiver and ran off. "Somebody . . . anybody! Stop him! The red AS!" he shouted, prompting the nearby men administering first aid to turn and look.

A number of young soldiers took off running like a shot, passing Mardukas—but the hangar was so wide, it was too far to reach the red AS. The sailors closest to it, a bit late realizing what was going on, ran toward the mech. The terrorist fired his submachine gun on full auto at them. The sailors were forced to scramble, dive to the side, and take refuge behind small trailers and ammo containers.

Unfortunately, the red AS, Venom, had been secured, and the cockpit hatch was open. It only took an instant to slip inside. Venom's cockpit hatch swiftly closed with the terrorist inside. That was that—not even human handguns and rifles could scratch it.

Mardukas paled, came to a halt, and shouted at the soldiers around him. "Take the wounded and evacuate the hangar! Go anywhere! Just run!"

Boosh! Venom started up the generator and released the joint locks. The red mech shook and creaked, slowly starting to build up power. The fingers, arms, and legs began to move, and one after the



next, it tore off the wires holding it down. The severed wires writhed like snakes and scattered sparks as they hit the floor.

"I can do this. It's not over yet," said a man's voice through the external speaker. Venom let out a mumbled laugh and stood up so tall that its parietal almost rubbed the ceiling. The AS reached out to a nearby weapons container and tore it open with terrible force.

There were about fifty men still in the hangar. Nearly all of them sensed the impending danger and were trying to escape the hangar with wounded comrades on their shoulders. If it went wild in this way, the ship undoubtedly would be destroyed. Nevertheless, they couldn't attack the enemy with infantry antitank rockets or anti-AS mines. Near the hangar were the powder magazine and torpedo launch room, the vertical launch missile tubes, and the storehouse of jet fuel for aircraft use. That was enough combined explosive power to blow up this sub a hundred times and still have some left over.

"XO, you too!"

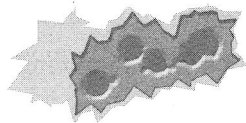
"I know, but—"

There was a sound from another direction. A fair distance from Venom, one of the de Danaan's docked and secured mechs had fired up its generator, releasing its secondary locks. The Arm Slave's two



sharp eyes shone red for an instant. It stored up power, raised its knees, and tore the retraining wires one by one.

Sergeant Sagara? The ARX-7 Arbalest stood up heavily.



Pummeled by unforeseen high waves, the ship veered significantly to the right.

The image picked up by the Arbalest's dual sensors was projected on the cockpit screen. Directly opposite him was the red AS. Sousuke and Gauron confronted each other at either end of the rectangular hangar.

The word "showdown" seems fitting, thought Sousuke.

They had suffered a lot of abuse. He probably was the first man to put this force—the Tuatha de Danaan—in such a predicament. *Now I have to admit it: Gauron, I think you're a monster. Three years ago, you took everything from me. The electric appliance dealer Hamidra, the courageous Muhammad, the cynical Khalili, a lot of comrades, and the one who taught me the ABCs of fighting—that old warrior Yaqub. You killed them all. That was the first time I understood what loss meant. When I stand before you, my legs shake. I feel like I've had enough and I want to run away. Now, you're trying to take everything from*



me again: Kurz, Mao, Yang, Tessa—so many comrades. And Kaname—you're trying to kill them all. But that's the one thing I can't allow. Understand? That alone, I can never allow. So . . .

"I'll kill you," Sousuke muttered, operating his mech smoothly. The weapons rack on its lower side opened loudly, and a monofilament cutter rose up. As if stimulated by a will of steel, the Arbalest readied his knife.

"Hmm hmm hmm. Oh happy day, Kashim." Venom took a monofilament cutter out of the weapons container, and smoothly assumed a defensive posture.

The two mechs ran their cutters simultaneously. The internal motors spun the minute chainsaw edges at high speed, and a high piercing sound echoed through the hangar. They each took a half step forward, followed by another half step.

An AS was an extension of a trained soldier's body. If the abilities of the mechs were roughly equal, what decided the battle were the operator's senses—the smell of death and the will of a cool-headed killer.

The two mechs, each standing taller than twenty-six feet, offered no openings as they slowly approached each other. Their frames tensed, but their movements within their rigid casings were fluid. The instant the gap



closed, both knives pierced through the air. Light flashed, and Venom's armor covering its left arm was sliced. The Arbalest backed away slightly.

"Whoops?"

Sousuke had no intention of letting Gauron rest. He made his mech step in low, sideswiping Venom with its knife. Venom pulled back its right leg; barely dodging the flash, it brought its knife down diagonally. The Arbalest repelled the attack. It grabbed Venom and tried to knock the AS off balance, but Venom got away. Venom tried to grab back, but Sousuke slashed at it. The knives collided, and then there was a sharp stab, which the enemy evaded. Move, cut, slash. The offense and defense accelerated suddenly. The slicing attacks that were happening once per breath increased to twice, then three times. Each AS was fuelled by unbridled killing intent.

Amid the thunderous roar of iron hitting iron and sparks flying every which way, Gauron said in an effected, feminine voice, "Right, right, right! Move! Faster!"

He's mocking me! Sousuke's eyes opened. His power of concentration exceeded its limit, and one instant was prolonged eternally.

The Arbalest's left hand tightly grabbed the wrist of Venom's knife hand. Relying on his mech's strength, Sousuke pulled on the arm, nailing the enemy's flank with a knee kick.



"Guh!" Venom crashed into the hangar wall. The steel frame was bent, pipes were crushed, lighting equipment on the ceiling was lost, and glass fragments rained down.

The Arbalest continued by springing and thrusting its knife, showing no mercy whatsoever. Its cutter pierced Venom's left shoulder, the momentum of which tore off the enemy's armor. When it held the knife high for another strike, Venom pressed its left index finger against the Arbalest's abdomen. This time, the Arbalest was thrown into the wall on the opposite side.

It was that finger gun that had defeated Mao. It was a directed shock wave utilizing the Lambda Driver. Despite having taken a direct hit from it, there was no internal damage to the Arbalest. *The opposing functionality of his Lambda Driver had activated, or had it activated with the attack that first inflicted damage on Venom?* Sousuke didn't think about it further.

Sousuke would direct the Arbalest to smash the enemy before him. That was all that mattered. The shock of hitting the wall knocked the wind out of him, and a violent pain shot through his ribs, but he ignored it and charged at Venom. He paid no notice to a small trailer, kicking it away. He thought he had heard someone's ferocious roar, but it was his own. He threw a kick, and Venom



dodged it. He reversed his stance and lashed out an elbow, but Venom dodged that, too. He grabbed the scruff of Venom's neck and brought down his knife. This, Venom was unable to dodge.

The Arbalest's monofilament cutter sliced a vertical line down the enemy mech's face. The red eye—Venom's sensor—was destroyed, and sparks scattered like a spray of blood.

"Ugh, ohhh!" wailed the enemy.

Sousuke wasn't satisfied. He stabbed his knife at the eyeless enemy mech's abdomen. Gauron read the tip with superhuman intuition, using his left arm as a shield. The knife cut in just below the elbow, tearing apart the drive system. Still not satisfied, Sousuke withdrew and stabbed again. Having overheated from repeated use, the cutter's edge let out a shrill screech and fell to pieces. Sousuke ferociously gripped the handle of the broken knife and beat Venom's torso over and over.

The enemy mech stepped back, and its back hit a wall beside an elevator at the rear of the hangar. "Guh! Oh!"

Sousuke noticed Venom's movements had slowed and so finally stopped striking. The enemy mech shuddered and clung to the Arbalest, exactly how boxers in a clinch do. Violently heaving for breath, Sousuke looked at the wrist of his mech. Because he had relied



on brute force to punch through the enemy's armor, the Arbalest's manipulator was broken and was no longer usable.

"Kh-heh heh heh . . . I give . . ." Gauron muttered through the external speaker, which still seemed functional. Venom now was one step away from being scrap. The head was destroyed, left arm hardly could move, and the chest armor was bent and starting to come off. "You won this one, Kashim. No . . . maybe that's not true? I really am happy now that you get to be with me until the end. Hmm hmm hmm."

Not seeing his aim, Sousuke was a little disturbed—especially when Venom should have been hardly capable of resistance at this point. *No, he's . . . he's going to self-destruct!* Or so Sousuke's instincts told him.

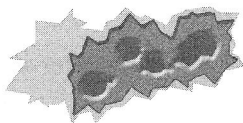
Gauron was trying with his body and soul to prevent the Arbalest from moving away. He tightly wrapped both arms and legs around it, sending all his remaining energy into the mech's electromagnetic muscles. Gauron's mech had more power from the start. Having not anticipated Gauron's intentions, escape was impossible. The Arbalest lost its balance and fell onto its backside on the elevator.

"Can't we just get along?" Gauron teased.

No question. That's what he's doing. What yield is the explosive? Enough to blow away my mech? Or enough to open a big hole in this ship?



All of a sudden, the floor shuddered. The elevator supporting the two mechs began to climb. It was a square platform, sixty-five feet per side, and was used to lift Arm Slaves and helicopters to the flight deck directly over the hangar.



Things were chaotic for the command center crew. There was the problem of pipes and cables of various sizes being broken by the combat in the hangar, and also the problem of the incomplete replenishment of pressurized air necessary for another dive. The American sub was persistently launching torpedoes, too, which was another serious problem.

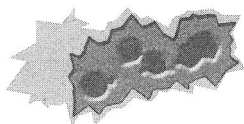
What had surprised them the most was when the craft's fore flight hatch—a huge hull section nearly two-hundred-thirty-feet long—had begun to open on its own. The flight hatch opened when helicopters and mechs had to take off, and was designed so that the sub's top could slide left and right to create a big opening. It was an act of madness to open the hatch in a storm like this, however.

Mardukas came running into the command center shouting, "What are you doing?"



All Goddard and the other crew could answer was, "We have no idea."

In front of them, large letters were displayed on the front screen. The typeface appeared somewhat girlish and rounded: "Don't worry, everything is gonna end happy!"



The elevator was even higher than it was before.

"Guess what, sixty seconds to go! By the way, it's six-hundred-sixty pounds of explosives. That's plenty for sinking this ship. Now what? Huh, now what do you do?" shouted Gauron. Venom's self-destruct apparently was on a timer.

The Arbalest tried to shake free of the enemy, but Venom stuck close to him, its hands skillfully placed here and there, obstinately clinging on. The fingers on one of the Arbalest's hands were busted, and Sousuke was unable to tear away from his opponent. The two mechs entangled together looked like *judoka* attempting to pin each other.

"Hah hah! How about this? Kind of shameful, isn't it?" Gauron laughed like a jokester devil. "I won't let you look good and finish it



with one hit like some hero. Go on, struggle! We'll go together, all showy and screwy-like! Right, Kaaashiiiiim?"

What's with this guy? wondered Sousuke. *He's not right. No, I already knew that. This man's nature is rotten to the core. He'd do anything to someone he hates.*

The elevator's ascent stopped. The two Arm Slaves were on the deserted flight deck. The giant flight hatch already had been opened, and the dark sky was visible. Rain and spray from the rough sea blew around, dampening the Arbalest and Venom. There was a roar that sounded as if the ground were rumbling, followed by a fierce tremor. They were, without a doubt, in the middle of a storm. Had any unprotected humans been here, they would have been blown away like scraps of paper.

If he could drag Venom to the edge of the flight deck, Sousuke could throw this enemy into the sea before the explosion. Even if he couldn't shake free, the two of them plunging in would save the de Danaan. *Who had operated the elevator? Who had opened the flight hatch?* Sousuke didn't know. Whoever it was, he or she had heard Gauron's voice and fathomed that he was going to self-destruct.

However, it was more than one-hundred-sixty feet from this elevator to the edge of the flight deck. Grappling like this, his freedom



of movement gone, all he could do was crawl. It would take a full minute to reach the bow, cutting into the huge waves. It would be too late.

Whether he knew that or not, Gauron shouted, "Thirty seconds! What do you do, honeyyy?"

"Kh . . . !" Sousuke shook his mech and struck Venom, thrashing haphazardly. It was no use; he couldn't shake free. He tried crawling, but it was too slow, and the edge of the flight deck was too far. *If it were free, the Arbalest could run several hundred feet in a second!*

"Ten seconds! Not! It's really fifteen! Hee, hyahhhh, hah hah hah!" Gauron was a thoroughly nasty man.

Sousuke ground his teeth and observed the flight deck. Then, his eyes stopped on it: a metal part mounted on the deck that was well within reach. The protuberance, several feet in length, was similar to a track and field runner's start pedal.

"Ten more seconds!" White steam escaped from Venom's base. "Hurry, hurry!"

The Arbalest moved its spinal column at full power, bounded off the ground, and reached out for the part, its left hand grabbing hold. The wire gun built into the arm was released as if a fishing rod's reel, and it coiled around the part's hook. Sousuke again wrapped the wire around Venom's torso.



"Five seconds! I love you, Kashiim!"

Ignoring Gauron's words, Sousuke shouted over the entire radio band: "Launch!" The steam catapult's shuttle block suddenly activated. That small metal part was an apparatus to accelerate an AS or fighter to take-off speed in only a few seconds. Its power was absolute.

Venom and Arbalest, caught up in the wire, were pulled along by the explosive force of the shuttle block and glided above the flight deck. The mechs charged toward the edge of the ship as if they were going to leap over it.

"Oh . . . oh . . . ooohhh!" The mechs plunged through the one-hundred-sixty feet in an instant, and they were thrown to the sea far, far beyond the edge of the flight deck. By then, the Arbalest somehow had managed to hook the flight deck with the wire gun in its other arm. The shock made the wire gun's anchor hook start to detach, but it remained in the deck, providing a thin lifeline between the Arbalest and the ship.

Venom, meanwhile, had no wire gun. The red AS spun through the air, and after it fell into a large wave on the stormy sea, there was a large explosion. "Six-hundred-sixty pounds of explosives" was no lie.



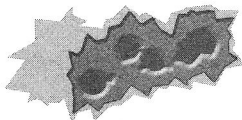
A deep red blast swelled up in the middle of the raging storm. The explosion that occurred in front and a bit to the right of the de Danaan beat the surface and scattered shrapnel, making the giant sub lean toward starboard. The shockwave nearly caused the Arbalest to fall into the sea, but its free left hand somehow clung to the deck's edge. The flaming pieces dispersed and fell into the water, and the Tuatha de Danaan traveled right through the flames.

Sousuke carefully operated the mech, which was in danger of being thrown off as it crawled up onto the flight deck. Pieces of the exploded mech were strewn along deck, and even now, were flaring up, but died down once the rain hit them. The Arbalest lay facedown next to the catapult, its shoulders heaving up and down.

Gauron's dead this time—without a doubt. It's definitely not wishful thinking, Sousuke told himself. Even if, by some fluke, he was still alive in the water, this ocean and storm should finish him off. It was impossible to survive out there. His old enemy was dead, and he had gotten revenge for his war buddies, but Sousuke didn't feel overly sentimental. That man had been far too mean a character for him to feel that way. He was evil through and through, all the way to the end—practically to the point of it being a virtue.



"Damn you!" Sousuke muttered to himself, bathed in sweat and breathing intensely. "Kashim, Kashim!" Don't be so chummy, you son of a bitch."



Sousuke's voice, which was audible over the open channel, was unexpectedly heard by Kaname. Sousuke was using abusive language—but in this context, it was kind of charming. He had human weaknesses, after all, and a convoluted, complex past. His attitude toward her after that operation must have been because of Gauron and related problems from said past.

I'm sorry I said insensitive things to you, thought Kaname sincerely. When you think about it, I still don't know anything about you.

It was true. Although they were the same age, Sousuke was a veteran mercenary, a top-class soldier, and a member of this submarine's forces. He'd magnificently taken care of that bad guy. *He's amazing. To be honest, I think he's really cool.* For someone like him to get so worked up over her made her strangely happy.

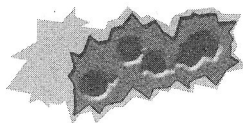
Kaname felt the ship's breath. The Arbalest returned inside, and the flight hatch closed. The required pressurized air would be ready



soon. The torpedoes fired by the Pasadena were approaching, but once the superconductive propulsion was restored, they should be able to skillfully shake those off.

It's all right now, Kaname thought, separated from the Sphere. She opened her eyes in the intermediary between mind and matter—TAROS. The cover that was over her opened, revealing the ceiling of Lady Chapel.

There were a lot of things she thought she most likely would forget: the workings of this craft, what she had done, that power, how she interfaced with the Sphere. At this point, she still was able to understand almost all of it.



USS Pasadena

“Uh, Toy Box is moving off. Depth: five hundred. At incredible speed—probably more than fifty knots. I doubt our torpedoes can catch it. How do I say this?” the sonarman announced.

XO Takenaka completed the announcement: “They got away. What an amazing submarine.”



Captain Sailor's shoulders drooped, and he looked at Takenaka with reproachful eyes. "What are we then? We even fired four ADCAPs, worth hundreds of thousands of dollars each. This practically makes me a grade-A idiot."

"Sir, all I can say is, if the shoe fits . . ."

Sailor grabbed Takenaka, and the rest of his men jumped in to break it up.



Epilogue

The dead numbered four: Dunnigan and Nguyen, who had worked as traitors—those two didn't matter, anyway—and the murdered Captain McAllen and Private Lian, who were unable to rest in peace.

Mardukas and the other officers commented, "It's a miracle to lose only two men in that situation." The achievement of there being no deaths once the seajacking was underway was largely credited to Tessa acting as captain—but in spite of that, she was terribly disheartened.

Lieutenant Commander Kalinin, who was briefed afterward, also felt a strong sense of responsibility. After all, the traitors in question had been SRT personnel under his charge, and his own adjutant was dead. He seemed to resolve something in secret, but no one had any way of knowing what it was.



After arriving at the Merida Island base, the customary crew roll call was performed, traditionally the captain's task. On the Tuatha de Danaan, land combat personnel also were included in this.

Tessa had memorized the names of all her subordinates. Walking in front of the whole group aligned on the underground dock, Tessa said, "Commander Richard Mardukas."

"Aye!"

"Lieutenant William Goddard."

"Aye!"

After hundreds of names had been called, Tessa called out *that* name: "Captain Gail McAllen."

"On patrol, captain," answered Mardukas.

Tessa nodded, expressionless as she remembered the first-place winner of the BINGO contest . . . his smiling face. She managed to stop thinking of him, thanks to some semblance of self-control. "Master Sergeant Melissa Mao," she called.

"Yes ma'am."

"Sergeant Roger Thunderraptor."

"Aye!"

"Sergeant Kurz Weber."

"Present."



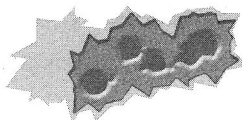
"Sergeant Sousuke Sagara."

"Aye!"

Dunnigan's and Nguyen's names were not among the SRT. Before long, the roll call moved to the PRTs' names, and she called out the name of one other dead man: "Private Lian Xiaoping."

"On patrol, captain," announced Mardukas coldly. Sure enough, Tessa said nothing.

The roll call ended, and the remains were transported from the base. McAllen's and Lian's caskets were carried on the shoulders of six colleagues. Their remains would be buried in graveyards in their own homelands, and their families would be told, "They died in an accident while on duty for the Argyros security firm." The details of the situation would not be explained, nor would they learn of Tessa's existence. She wouldn't be allowed to write to the families, either. That was the way of these things, though.



Kaname came to understand Tessa's pain from this incident.

Tessa watched the transport planes with the caskets take off from the disguised runway, and afterward, she walked alone toward the Merida Island base residential sector.



Noticing this, Kaname said to Sousuke, "Go on, tell her you hope she feels better."

Seeming as though he were at a loss, Sousuke approached Tessa.

Kaname watched them in a deserted hallway from afar. After Sousuke said something to her, Tessa clung to his chest, buried her face, and sobbed.

Kaname released a long sigh and returned to the guest room she had been allocated.

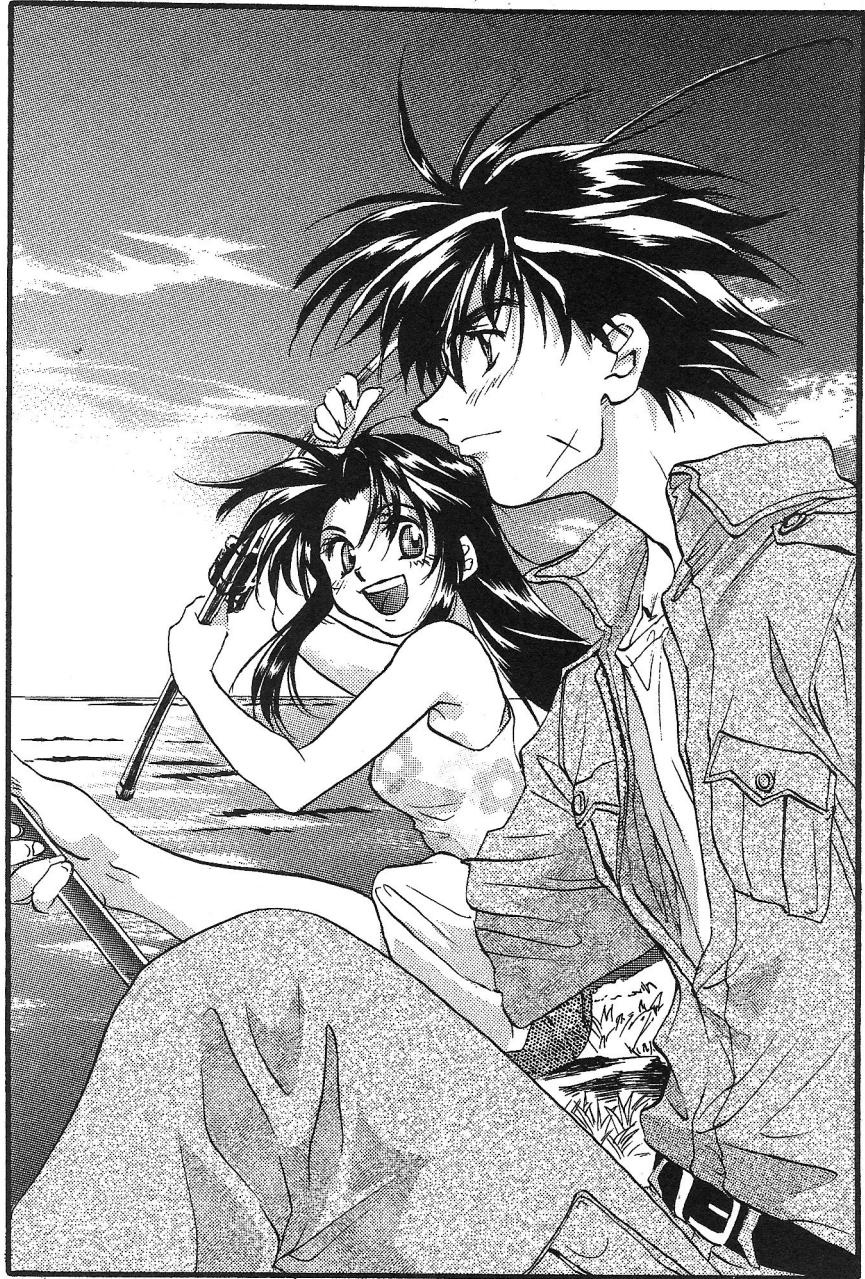
About four hours prior to takeoff time for the flight en route to Tokyo, Sousuke showed up at the guest room.

"What?" Kaname asked.

"Come with me," Sousuke said, carrying what looked like a rifle case and ammo box.

Without completely understanding, Kaname accompanied him on a walk nearly ninety minutes north of the base to an area surrounded by rocky mountains and broadleaf trees. At the end of their journey, they approached a rocky beach with the westering sun hanging overhead. It was a beautiful scene.

"Take this," Sousuke said as he removed a carbon fiber fishing rod from the rifle case, handing it to Kaname.





"What is this?"

"A fishing rod."

"No, not that. This place."

"A secret fishing spot," Sousuke replied sullenly. "No one at the base knows of it but me."

"Fishing . . . I mean, if we're getting on that plane for Tokyo, we can't be here any longer than forty minutes."

"I don't mind. This was my initial mission objective."

"Huh?" Kaname looked doubtful, and Sousuke cast his baited fishing line into the sea with a plunk.

"I had intended to bring you here in the first place. But we ended up taking quite . . . a detour."

"H-here?"

"Affirmative."

Sousuke looked down at his watch and nodded. "So fish! You might catch a big one in thirty minutes."

"Moron! Like I really could, anyway."

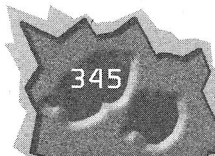
"Who knows?" Sousuke said intrepidly. "When I'm with you, I feel like I could do anything: catch an unbelievably big fish, escape from terrible danger. So, thirty minutes is enough if you spend a little time with me."



"You really feel that way?"

"Of course. It's because you're here that I'm here now."

Kaname was taken aback, but before long, a smile lit her whole face. "Okay, you're on. I think it's time to put that jinx of yours to the test." She cast into the water, and the two of them stayed on the beach next to each other. It was a mere half an hour, and in the end, they didn't catch a single fish, nor did anything particularly unusual happen. But they enjoyed that half hour to the fullest.





Afterword

Sorry to make you wait for such a terribly long time. Sousuke's old enemy made a comeback to once again torment Mithril—this time at sea! A military thriller in the ocean depths . . . Want to see it? Not really? Anyway, here you have the third full-length installment, *Full Metal Panic: Swaying into the Blue*.

The book ended up being rather thick again. Maybe that's not good. Not. N-not. Such strange sentences—Whispered speech, that is. They probably are out of their minds. This time, there are a strangely vast number of complex military terms and codes, too, but it's okay if you don't understand them. I'm sure the author doesn't, either. It's all about ambiance, ambiance, ambiance. The same goes for "Heavy damage to the third bridge!" on the *Yamato*, or Bright saying, "Portside, what're you doing? You call that a barrage?" It's no different than Doraemon shouting, "Here, takecopter!" or an



AS squad equipped with takecopters taking off from an amphibious assault submarine—or evading armor-piercing rounds using hirari mantles, for that matter.

“Al, use the Earth-destruction bomb.”

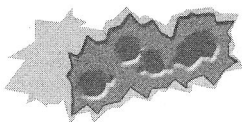
“Roger. EDB, ready.”

Just spinning my wheels, spinning my wheels.

It felt like the last book, *One Night Stand*, followed a pretty mild track, so this time, I remembered the foundation of *Boy Meets Girl* and made it a bit hardcore again, but with a *shittori*, mellow feel, and at sea, of course. *Shittori. Mattari. Shite yattari*. Japanese rap? I don’t like it. Tore said so, too. Who? Spinning my wheels!

I never know what to write about in afterwords for the full-length stories. So, for that reason, goodbye. Or, like I’m broken: *gub-bai*.

Only a page and a half so far. . . . In that case, let’s call in another guest. This time it’s a big benefactor person who I am indebted to (the very essence of bad writing), Mr. Kazuma Shinjo, who is now writing the *Kurou Legend* series for Fujimi Fantasia Books. He is a company head, has a dandy mustache, is a former Keio Boy, and is a nice bilingual guy (bilinguy for short?). Let’s give him a hand! *Clap clap. Thump thump, Fwuff fwuff. Boff*.



KS: Ah, thanks, this is Shinjo. It was just the other day that I wrote a “live on location” afterword for my own novel, and here I am again. I wonder if that’s okay.

SG: I’d say that it’s okay. I’d been wanting to do this again for a while.

KS: Oh, alright then. By “again,” you mean you’ve done it before?”

SG: Oh, yes. Readers who were introduced to me through *Full Metal Panic* probably don’t know that I used to have dialogues like this in *Horai Academy* and whatnot.

KS: Hmm, true, come to think of it. That brings back some memories. But the young need to keep their eyes on the future. And so the full-length novel this time around . . . What was it—a story about the sea?”

SG: That is correct. It’s a shonen summer love story—psych!

KS: [Silence.]



SG: It really is about an elaborate passenger boat sinking. It sweeps the Oscars. Psych.

KS: [*Smiling kindly.*] No, don't mind me. Continue. But if it's like this to the end, and fills up the pages, I wonder if you're going to get it back from your editor, "Three Month" Satou.

SG: About that: You keep saying "Three Month, Three Month" in reference to Ms. Satou, so a lot of people seem to be under the impression that she's three months pregnant.

KS: "Oh man, that again. [*He turns to look at Fujimi Books nine floors down.*] I really caused her some trouble that time, for which I'm very sorry. All you readers, that is not the reason for that nickname, so please don't get the wrong idea. Ms. Satou is a fine and capable editor, and also (insert as many flowery words you can think of). Ahem.

SG: I'll say. Ms. Satou has guts, and (insert as many flowery words you can think of). So, I'm sure she won't yell at me. Ha ha ha. To summarize, even though this story is at sea and a submarine shows up, the pretty captain does not put on a swimsuit. This may be a problem.

KS: Eh, she doesn't?

The crowd: For reeeaaaalll?

President of the United States: Is that true, Mr. Gatou?

SG: It is all true, Mr. President. I finished writing, realized it, and there was no place in which to put such a scene. Woe is me . . .

President of the United States: Hmm, is that so? I don't know much about writing novels, but it looks as though some of the pitfalls are pretty hairy.

SG: Yes, that they are. Mr. President, you have people like Monica at your work place, so I imagine you can enjoy your days, but all I have at my work place are plastic Gundam models. Well, no, I do enjoy them for what they're worth.

KS: You sure about this? Weren't we going to avoid current events? When this book comes out, Clinton will still be in office, but next year, someone else will be doing it. By the way, all you readers, this afterword dialogue is being written in January 2000.

SG: Ah, darn it. You know, the *Full Metal Panic* world is set at the end of the twentieth century, but now we're about to hit the twenty-first century. Dear me, the way time flies.

KS: Hmm. Now that you mention it, we're already out of the 1900s. It used to be that on the front page of magazines, you'd see that in the year 2000 or 2001, we'd have flying cars, a colony on Mars, and would be talking with dolphins in ocean floor bases. What do you suppose ever happened to the flying cars and Mars?



SG: Mars, flying cars, the future. Also, railroads running through transparent tubes.

KS: And humanoid robots. Oh, I guess we're on the verge of that one. It sure is nice, the Honda P3. Hey, we're way off topic. We were talking about the captain in a swimsuit.

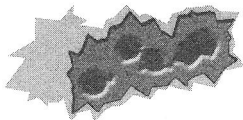
SG: Yes. I thought maybe I could pull that off in the epilogue, but it was too serious for it. I'll set up some opportunity for it eventually—but for now, I ask for forgiveness and patience from all you fans. If I have to say, she's in "cool mode" this time.

KS: I get it. You're leaving something to look forward to as you explore the appeal of characters' different facets. You're a real craftsman.

SG: Uh, hey, thanks. Eh heh heh. [*He looks at his watch casually.*] Oh, it's about that time. So, goodbye, everyone!

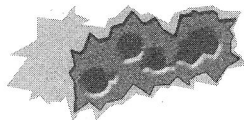
KS: That was sudden! [*He pulls a slapstick fan out of nowhere and hits me with it.*] Oh, right, I was told to read this before we finished. Here. [*He takes a piece of paper out of his pocket and hands it over.*]

SG: Huh? Please read something like that yourself. Uh-oh, he's gone—like he was some blue whirlwind. Blue gale. Brings a tear to the eye.



Whew. It's easy for me to write this kind of dialogue, so the text really piles up. Ahh, a lifesaver. Thanks. Now I'm back down to earth. And the memo says, "Introduction to the *Kurou Legend* mail game."

Well, although Mr. Shinjo is an odd dude like that, he's actually a pretty amazing person. Whenever I encounter the fictional world of his works, I realize what an uncommonly erudite writer he is to make it so deep and cool (and that's not merely flattery—really). In any case, he creates the history and customs of that world, and even a developed system of language (even grammar—*grammar!*). When I create the *Full Metal Panic* world, it is under no small (in fact, a considerable amount of) influence from Mr. Shinjo.

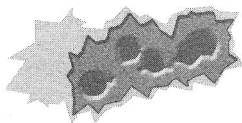


Now then, this time I bothered many people extensively. Above all, Mr. Shikidouji, I really am sorry. I feel very bad that I was unable to send you any decent materials. Despite that, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for your always-soulful



illustrations. They've made me realize the limitations of print type.

I'm also very thankful for Masayuki Takano, who did the most cool designs for the TDD. Big thanks, as well, to my editor Ms. Satou, and everyone involved with the book whose names I don't know. Big thanks to everyone who went to a bookstore for the January release. And big thanks and a big apology to everyone who kept looking for my work whenever Fantasia January books was put up for sale. Really, I'm sorry. Thank you.



So, in the end, this ended up being a long afterword. See you later. Come follow Sousuke through hell again next time.

— Shouji Gatou, January 2000

Mithril Amphibious Assault Submarine

Tuatha de Danaan

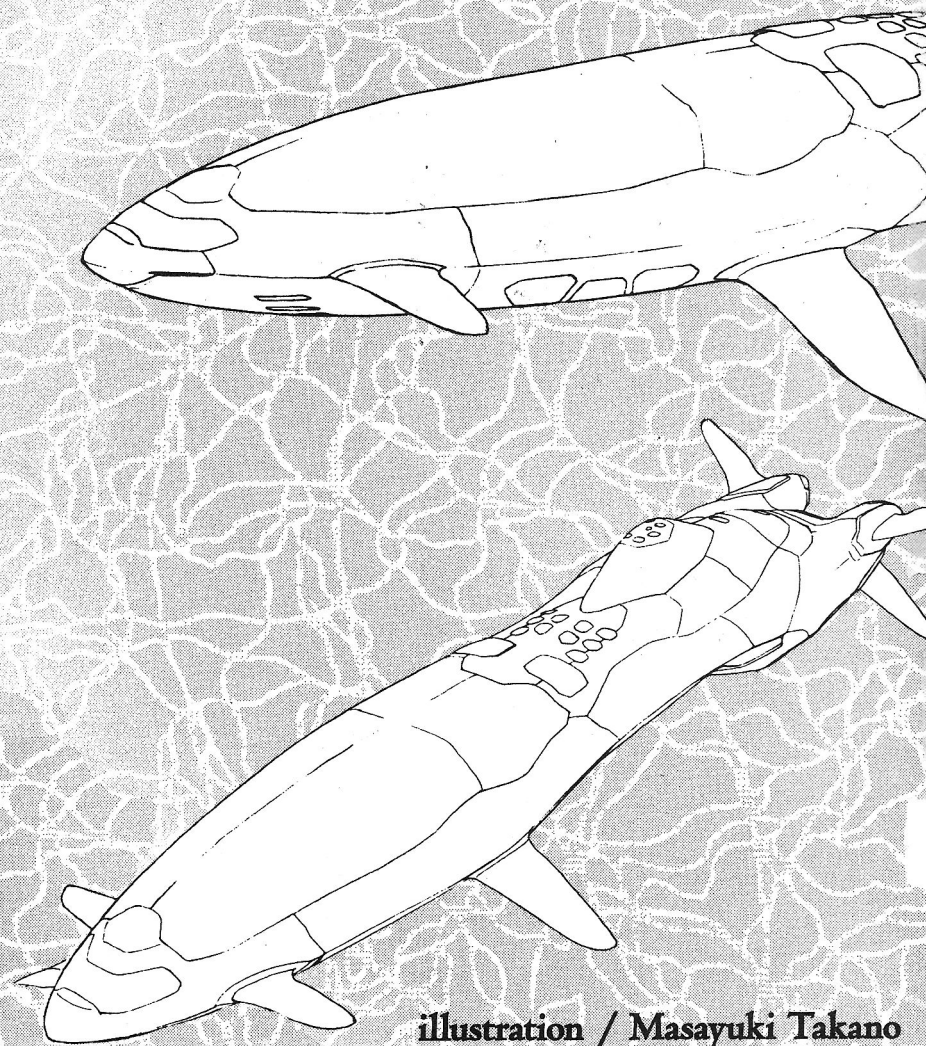
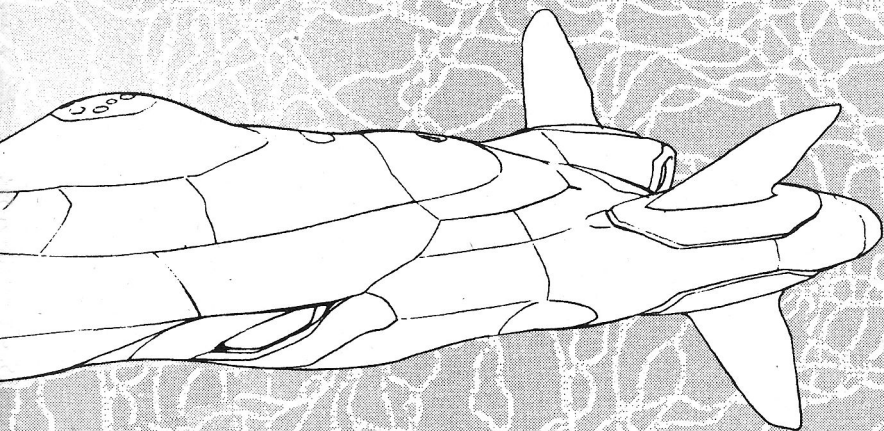


illustration / Masayuki Takano



TDD-I

Tuatha de Danaan

◇DATA◇

- ship type: amphibious assault submarine
- length: 715 feet
- width: 144 feet (excluding diving planes)
- displacement: surfaced / 30,800t
submerged / 44,000t
- main drive: PS type palladium reactor x3 / electric drive / dual axle • 210,000hp
- maximum speed: using only normal propulsion.....30kn
normal propulsion • EMFC.....40kn
superconductive propulsion •

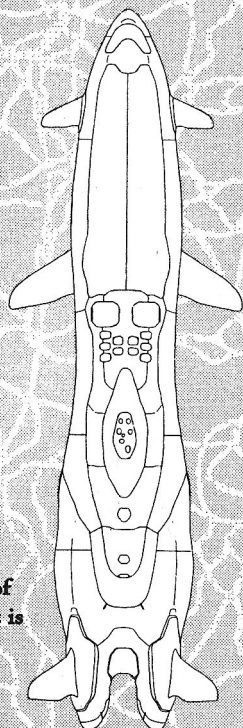
EMFC.....65kn+

- standard armament: 533mm torpedo launch tubes x 6
multipurpose vertical missile launch tubes x 10

ballistic missile launch tubes x 2
Mk48 Mod6 ADCAP torpedoes
Advanced Harpoon antiship missiles
Tomahawk cruise missiles

numerous others

* [Project 985], which served as a prototype, had a length of 600 feet and width of 118 feet. Its submerged displacement is estimated to be 32,000t.





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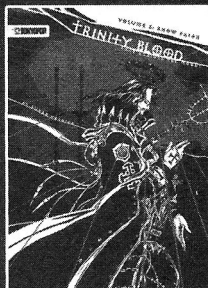
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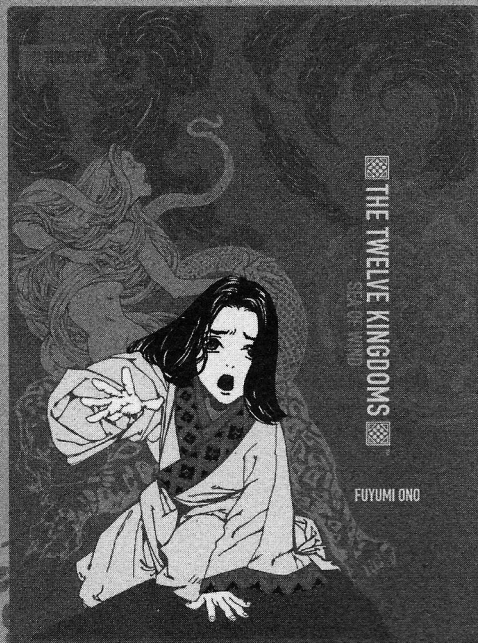
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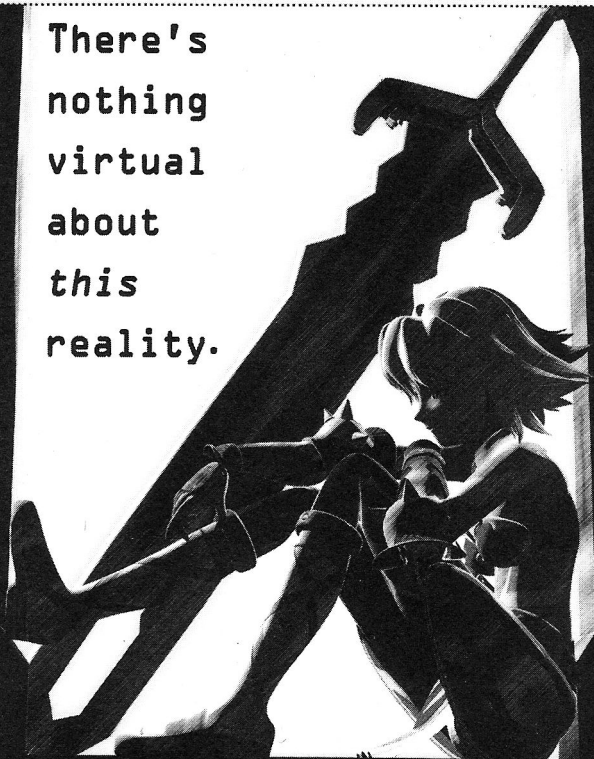
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